

KARL EDWARD WAGNER

PRESENTS

THE YEAR'S BEST
**HORROR
STORIES**

X

HORROR • 888677-UE2160
(CANADA \$3.95) • U.S. \$2.95



No. 483



THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES X

“Horror fiction has held a universal appeal throughout the ages. Every culture has had its myths of demons and ghosts and were-beasts. If Stephen King is read by millions today, so did Victorian readers line up in the streets to buy the latest chapters of the penny-dreadfuls, and eighteenth century readers shivered beside their candles over the pages of the newest Gothic novel. People like to be frightened, whether by a movie or a book or just a good spooky story told by firelight.

“The question is often asked: Why do people like to be frightened? Perhaps a better question: Why do *certain* people like to frighten *other* people? Sorry—a trade secret.

“Writers of horror fiction *want* to frighten people, and it is my task to select those who best succeed in this ...”

—The Editor

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Edited by
KARL EDWARD WAGNER

DAW BOOKS, INC.
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER
1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

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Cover art by Michael Whelan.

For color prints of Michael Whelan paintings, please contact:

Glass Onion Graphics
P.O. Box 88
Brookfield, CT 06804

DAW Book Collectors No. 493.

First Printing, August 1982

3 4 5 6 7 8 9

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Wickerman eBooks

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To Ramsey Campbell

I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after and changed my ideas. They've gone through and through me, like wine through water and altered the colour of my mind.

—Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*

INTRODUCTION: *A Decade of Fear*

There are times when an editor's task would be much simpler if he had twice the wordage allotted to an anthology than that which was required. This past year, 1981, produced a bumper crop of excellent horror fiction, and if *The Year's Best Horror Stories* had only been a double-size volume, I would have been spared any number of late night decisions, agonizing over which stories I would have to exclude from the final list of contents. While a good horror story is supposed to give its reader a restless night, this isn't the sort of nail-biting that's meant.

For once, there was good news for horror fans on the magazine front, with the appearance in April of a new monthly newsstand periodical, *Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone Magazine*. Under the skillful editorship of T.E.D. Klein (a gifted horror writer himself), the magazine manages to crowd about ten stories into each issue, with articles and reviews, a color photograph section on current fantasy films, and a detailed look at the old *Twilight Zone* television series, complete with a script of one episode. If you haven't discovered *Twilight Zone Magazine* for yourself, by all means do so.

Chillers, a less well-mounted attempt to combine fiction with horror film features, lasted only three issues before vanishing entirely, a victim of poor distribution. The only other magazines with newsstand circulation and partial fantasy content remain the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the ancient *Amazing*, which began including fantasy as well as science fiction after the death of its companion magazine, *Fantastic*. By its bootstraps, *Amazing* managed six bimonthly issues in 1981, but one wonders how much longer this patriarch of all science fiction magazines can continue.

An effort to revive *Weird Tales* yet again, this time as a paperback series, resulted in three disastrous anthologies from Zebra Books. Dismal collections of creaky reprints and inept offerings by old hands, the series was saved from total mediocrity by a number of superior horror stories by the genre's newer writers—proving not so much that writers are better today as that today's good writers at their best are far better than yesterday's great names at their worst.

Although there were no shelf-bender-class original anthologies as there were the year before, 1981 was another good year for horror anthologies. Best of these was *Whispers III* from Doubleday, editor Stuart David Schiff's third collection

of the best of *Whispers* magazine together with an excellent lineup of new horror fiction—as well as interior art and what has to be the best dust jacket from Doubleday since the First World War. Doubleday also published *Shadows 4*, the fourth in Charles L. Grant's series of “quiet” horror anthologies. Grant was also editor of the less quiet *Horrors* from Playboy Paperbacks, and he was author of two fine collections of his own short fiction, *A Glow of Candles* from Berkley Books and *Tales from the Nightside* from Arkham House.

Modern Masters of Horror (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan), edited by Frank Coffey, was an interesting collection of short fiction by authors known for the most part as “names” in the film and the best-seller industries. Arbor House offered *Creature!*, another of Bill Pronzini's theme collections of new and reprint Fiction, as well as the mammoth *Arbor House Treasury of Horror and the Supernatural*—worth mention here despite its being a reprint anthology. A number of paperback original anthology series continued to offer fantasy during 1981, notably *The Berkley Showcase* and *New Dimensions*.

Overseas the horror anthology did well, despite the severe recession in British publishing. Of particular merit was Hugh Lamb's *New Tales of Terror* (Magnum Books), an excellent anthology of all original horror fiction that was sadly overshadowed by the super-anthologies, *Dark Forces* and *New Terrors*, when Lamb's collection was belatedly released. A number of long-lived paperback horror series again appeared during 1981. *The 22nd Pan Book of Horror*, edited by Herbert van Thal, was a distinct improvement over recent volumes in the series. Fontana Books offered superior fare in their rival, *The 14th Fontana Book of Great Horror Stories*, edited by Mary Danby. Danby also edited *The 13th Armada Ghost Book* for younger readers, as well as *65 Great Tales of Horror*—this last almost entirely reprint. From Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes came *The 17th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, along with *The 6th Armada Monster Book*. These annual series publish a good deal of original horror fiction as well as reprints, and it's a loss for American horror fans that they aren't readily available in the States. Finally, from Australia came *Distant Worlds*, another of editor-publisher Paul Collins' fine anthologies of science fiction and fantasy.

The amateur press continues to be the most active market for horror fiction, both for beginning writers and well-known professionals alike. Produced as labors of love by industrious fans, amateur publications run the gamut from mimeographed booklets stapled together on the living room floor to slick paper and color cover productions that exceed the quality of professional magazines. Similarly, rates of payment can run from less than nothing to better than professional magazine rates. It is rumored that there was once a fan publisher who made a profit, but this is unsubstantiated. The significant aspect of amateur

publishing is the dauntless enthusiasm with which those involved approach the field.

A new magazine, *Fantasy Book*, was the most ambitious new face of 1981 in the semi-pro field (that is, an amateur-produced magazine that pays professional rates but lacks nationwide newsstand distribution). Technically a revival of William Crawford's pioneering *Fantasy Book* of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the new *Fantasy Book* brought out two thick issues at the close of 1981 and planned to maintain its bimonthly schedule throughout 1982. A similar publication was the new science fiction semi-prozine, *Rigel. Sorcerer's Apprentice*, predominantly a fantasy gaming magazine that includes some fiction as well, continued to improve with each issue in 1981, reaching its twelfth. *Night Voyages*, maturing with each issue, published its eighth issue by the close of the year. Two other ambitious and well produced continuing publications were *Wyrd* and Canada's *Miriad*. Also from Canada and coming on fast was *Potboiler*. Another newcomer of considerable promise was *Owlflight*.

There were a few casualties in 1981; among them, *Gothic*, a very literate semi-prozine ceased publication. *Whispers*, the leader of the field, again failed to publish an issue during the year, but two double issues are planned shortly. On the brighter side, *Myrddin*, an outstanding publication assumed moribund, reappeared under a new title, *Night Flights*. Nothing was heard from Charles de Lint and Charles Saunders' *Dragonfields*, but de Lint did produce a nice chapbook, *A Pattern of Silver Strings*. W. Paul Ganley's *Weirdbook*, one of the first of the semi-prozines, appeared in its fifteenth issue, after skipping a year, while *Amra*, the great-grandfather of epic fantasy fanzines, re-emerged after a long silence and produced its twenty-fifth anniversary issue. Another long-lived publication, *Space and Time*, reached its sixty-first issue. Meanwhile, Crispin Burnham's *Eldritch Tales* turned back the clock on itself to bring out its second issue; the fanzine had already published its seventh issue, but various problems had delayed the second issue until 1981. That's seeing it through.

From overseas came the fourth issue of *Kadath*, an English-language magazine luxuriously produced by Italy's Francesco Cova. England's *Fantasy Tales* appeared twice in 1981; this outstanding semi-prozine published by writer-editor David Sutton and artist Stephen Jones is the European equivalent of *Whispers*. The British Fantasy Society was active again, with its *B.F.S. Bulletin* continuing to expand under editor Carl Hiles, and its literary journal, *Dark Horizons*, being revamped under new editor David Sutton. Rosemary Pardoe published a third *Ghosts & Scholars*, a worthwhile fanzine devoted to M.R. James, that features fiction and articles, as well as a fine booklet of David G. Rowlands' Father O'Connor stories, *Eye Hath Not Seen ... Spanning the Atlantic*

with co-editors Dave Reeder in England and Richard Fawcett in the States, the second issue of *Fantasy Macabre* also appeared.

It all adds up to a long shelf of reading material—the more so considering that a great many horror stories are published outside genre sources; men's magazines, general fiction anthologies, even in magazines that wouldn't be thought to carry fiction (I mean, *Running Times*?). It isn't easy to keep up with it all. Here in Chapel Hill, I rely on Larry Shapiro of The Foundation Bookstore (the largest science fiction and fantasy bookstore in the southeast) to keep me supplied. As of now Larry doesn't issue catalogs, but if you need something, drop him a card at 136 East Rosemary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514; it might just be in stock. For those fans not fortunate enough to have a local specialty bookstore, two established dealers who issue regular catalogs of almost all imprint fantasy books and publications are Robert Weinberg (15145 Oxford Drive, Oak Forest, IL 60452) and J.S. Hurst (P.O. Box 236, Vienna, MD 21869). To keep abreast of what's being published, an indispensable reference is the monthly news magazine, *Fantasy Newsletter*. Subscriptions are \$16.00 per year from new editor Robert A. Collins, 500 NW 20th Street, Boca Raton, FL 33431.

This is the tenth volume in DAW Books' *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. The series originated in 1971, edited by Richard Davis for Sphere Books in England. The DAW edition of *Series I* was, appropriately, DAW Book No. 13. Gerald W. Page became editor with *Series IV*, after DAW Books continued the series on its own, and I took over with *Series VIII* when Page elected to devote more of his time to his own writing career. Ten years is a longish time for an anthology series, and during its decade of existence *The Year's Best Horror Stories* has remained unique. While there have been a number of "year's best" anthologies devoted to science fiction, this remains the *only* best-of-the-year horror anthology.

Horror fiction has held a universal appeal throughout the ages. Every culture has had its myths of demons and ghosts and were-beasts. If Stephen King is read by millions today, so did Victorian readers line up in the streets to buy the latest chapters of the penny-dreadfuls, and eighteenth century readers shivered beside their candles over the pages of the newest Gothic novel. People like to be frightened, whether by a movie or a book or just a good spooky story told by firelight.

The question is often asked: Why do people like to be frightened? Perhaps a better question: Why do *certain* people like to frighten *other* people? Sorry—a trade secret.

Writers of horror fiction *want* to frighten people, and it is my task to select those who best succeed in this. There are many levels of fear, and good writers

are constantly seeking effective avenues by which to reach these fears within us all, whether visceral as an axe-wielding maniac or psychological as a subtle erosion of reality. Not all stories work for all readers, for we do not all have the same fears. Or admit to having them.

Here, then, is *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series X*, marking the end of a decade. Once again, I have tried to select the *best* of the many fine horror stories published during the past year. Some of these stories are by well known authors, others represent a first or second sale; some are from familiar publications, others are from obscure sources; some represent traditional approaches to horror fiction, others demonstrate radical departures from the popular concept of horror fiction. My only intent was to bring together the best horror stories of the year, regardless of various considerations and taboos that otherwise might concern an anthologist.

This collection is traditional in one respect only: it marks the end of a decade for this unique annual series, and after ten years *The Year's Best Horror Stories* has become a tradition. Don't worry. If your heart has survived the past decade of fear, you can look forward to ten more years of carefully chosen nightmares.

That's *if* you survive *Series X*.

—KARL EDWARD WAGNER

THROUGH THE WALLS by Ramsey Campbell

When a 16-year-old kid writes a volume of horror stories, it's self-evident that he's a lost soul, and Ramsey Campbell has devoted the last twenty years to living up to his early horrifying promise. Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Campbell has seemingly dedicated his adult life to convincing the world that his native city is inhabited by cannibals, psychotic killers, and a jostling horde of nightmare creatures beside which the aforementioned fiends seem quite mundane. Since his first book, The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants (Arkham House, 1964), a collection of stories written during that adolescent Lovecraft phase that so many horror writers have gone through, Campbell has developed his own approach to horror fiction and has firmly established himself as one of the foremost stylists in this genre.

Ramsey Campbell's more recent books include novels: The Doll Who Ate His Mother, The Face That Must Die, To Wake the Dead (retitled The Parasite for the U.S. revision), and The Nameless; in addition to short story collections: Demons by Daylight, The Height of the Scream, and Dark Companions; as well as anthologies which he has edited: Superhorror (a.k.a. The Far Reaches of Fear), New Terrors, New Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos, and The Gruesome Book. This last is an anthology of horror stories for young readers, being the very same stories that scared Campbell as a child. As the twig is bent.

"Through the Walls" was published as a separate booklet, in an edition of 500 and nicely illustrated by David Lloyd, by the British Fantasy Society in time for Fantasycon VII in Birmingham this last July. This nerve-racking tour de force deserves a wider audience.

Hugh Pears was gathering mint in the back yard when he heard the crash. It sounded like someone hurled onto a sheet of tin. God, not the children! As he ran through the kitchen, Chris glanced at him, puzzled; she hadn't recognised the sound. "You aren't going out now," she protested. "The children will be home any minute." But he hadn't reached the front door when they ran in.

"There's a man hurt outside," Linda shouted.

"They nearly ran us over," Andrew shouted louder.

Pears let go of his fear with a gasp of relief. He hurried out. A red Mini had slewed into the wall of the house next door. The driver was lifting a figure from

the passenger seat. Its head was a raw red bulb; blood had rusted its hair.

When Pears opened his eyes he'd regained control. The driver was supporting his passenger, whose forehead was bleeding copiously. Pears wondered why he should have seen anything else. He wasn't fond of the sight of blood, but nor was he given to building nightmares out of it. "Bring him in here," he called. "My wife's a nurse."

As Pears helped them up the path, he saw the young man in the ground-floor flat next door gazing expressionlessly at them. Only his gaze moved, as if he were peering from behind a pale gaunt mask. If you can't help, Pears raged, then have the decency to take yourself elsewhere. The gaze followed them blankly, indifferent as the fog that massed at the edge of the streetlight, like dim spectators.

Chris sat the man in one of the white wood dining-chairs. "What happened?" she asked, tilting his head back.

"We skidded on a patch of oil," the driver said. "It looked big enough for a lorry. I wouldn't have thought they were supposed to come down a residential street, not a narrow one like this."

"Too many people don't care about that," Chris said.

The passenger was holding his trouser-leg away from his shin down which blood was running incontinently into his shoe. "This'll teach me to wear my seat-belt," he said, shaking.

She cleaned the wound and gave him a compress to hold against it. "I don't think it's serious, but we'd better be sure," she said, turning down the cooker. "I'll drive you to the hospital."

Andrew was sponging blood from the back of the chair. That jarred Pears out of the reverie through which he'd watched Chris caring for the man. The thoughts had streamed through his mind like smoke; he felt vaguely that he would prefer not to remember them. He shook his head. All this nonsense came of boredom, inertia, probably of feeling incapable of helping Chris. Get on with something. He strode into the back yard.

He'd finished gathering the mint when he heard Linda's cry of disgust. A spider, he thought, or a crane-fly or a slug. As he hurried through the kitchen and the dining area he saw, beyond the open front door down the hall, the young man from the flat standing on the pavement, gazing in. If he's what you're saying yuk to, Pears told Linda, I can't say I blame you. But she was staring at the hall wall.

Just inside the front door, the wallpaper had acquired a splotch of blood. Trickles were making their way toward the skirting-board. "Damn," Pears said. "He must have done it as they went out. Get me a cloth, Linda, quick."

He closed the front door. As Pears hid the blood from him, the young man

gaped in appalled disbelief. You're absolutely right, Pears told him, we're going to scrape it off and use it for soup.

He dabbed at the blood. Mrs Tarrant can get the worst of it off, she'll be here tomorrow. That's what she's paid for. He scrubbed as hard as he dared. The stain remained, but fainter. Eventually he sat and waited for his dinner, minutely lining up the cutlery, listening to Linda and Andrew playing pole-vaulting in the yard. His mind felt full of rapid formless smoke.

Over dinner Chris asked, "What exactly happened?"

"He shouldn't have driven down our road so fast," Andrew said.

"If someone hadn't been so stupid, they ran out in front of him, there wouldn't have been an accident," Linda said.

"I didn't see him. He came straight round the corner." He glared at her, the threat of angry tears in his eyes. "I bet you'd have been glad if I'd been run over."

"That's right. No, I wouldn't," Linda amended, trying to head off his mood. She put an arm round him, but he threw her off.

"You're quite right, Andrew," Chris said. "He shouldn't have been driving so fast. But for your own sake you must be more careful how you go."

Pears listened blankly. He heard the words, but it was as though he heard them through a wall; they seemed separate from him. He stared at the table, at the white wood and its reflected hints of the violet and lilac walls. The words affected him in the same way: they were there, that was all.

He gazed at his food as he ate. Wherever he looked, there seemed to be movement at the edge of his eye. Dark spots moved on the walls, as though the kitchen were a sweating cave, or as if the walls were the throat of a chimney, fluttering with soot. When he looked, the movements snapped into corners of the room or behind the furniture. His eyes must be tired. Perhaps he could blame the tree in the next yard, its shadow on the curtain swaying sluggishly, blurred by the gathering November fog. Perhaps he was overworked, though he hadn't thought himself to be more so than anyone else at the bank.

Andrew had been mollified, or nearly. "Sisters," he said witheringly. When he'd eaten his fruit he said, "May I leave the table? I'm going to dust Fritz."

Linda had been waiting for a chance at the last word in the argument. She was too much of a young lady now to stick out her tongue. "Aren't you too old for that thing yet?" she demanded. "When are you going to throw away the horrible doll?"

"Linda, you're only two years older," Chris said. "Hardly the voice of maturity."

"Well, *I* didn't want that doll when *I* was eight."

An aunt had brought her Fritz from Germany, but Linda had mislaid the doll behind her bed almost at once, complaining, "Alice's father brought her back a lovely German dress." "Give me the doll if you don't want him," Andrew had said. Pears supposed that now it was up to him to intervene. Anything to drag his mind free of the slow heavy dance of the nodding shadow on the curtains, to shake off the darkly teeming walls. "There's nothing horrible about Andrew's doll, Linda," he said.

"There is too. You come and look."

She pulled him into the hall. "Go outside and see," she said. "I used to like to look up at our bedroom when I came home. Now he makes it look nasty. I'll switch on the light so you can see."

She ran upstairs, pleats flirting from her bare thighs. A Majorca tan was fading from her legs. He must talk to Chris about making her wear longer skirts. She was far too enticing. One of these days—What? He snatched his gaze away from Linda as she reached the top of the stairs, and rushed himself out.

As Pears emerged, the young man next door was letting in three others. One displayed a fat hand-rolled multicoloured cigarette for approval. Stupid fools. No wonder the fellow in the flat looked so inert. And him an industrial chemist, if Pears wasn't misinterpreting his salary cheque: should know better.

When Linda switched on the light, the fog sprang forward, towering blankly on the opposite pavement. It settled clammily on Pears, who shivered and looked up. Fritz the doll was standing on the sill in the centre of the bay window, grinning out. Pears could just see his red knees over the sill, beneath his lederhosen. His raised tankard was halfway to his mouth; his painted wooden face was edged with light. He looked hideous.

Fog crept insinuatingly down Pears' spine, fog was a dwindling blank-faced box around him. The lawn stirred feebly, as if drowned. He tried to shake himself, but shuddered. Good God, he was standing in his own front garden, looking at his own house: what could be so terrible in that? But he could hardly keep his eyes on the doll.

It looked like an overgrown bloated schoolboy mottled with red paint as if its skin were bursting. Beneath the blue glass eyes, the grin had become secretive, knowingly obscene. Its free hand hovered near its flies. It was all the effect of the fog; fog had tinted its face shinily grey, slimy, diseased. It looked swollen with waste, that might gush forth at any moment.

Linda read his expression. "See?" she called.

"I must say," Pears said warily, "he looks rather a nasty little man today."

He didn't realise that Andrew was in the bedroom until the boy appeared behind Linda, weeping. He pushed her out of the way and threw up the sash,

then he hurled the doll into the road. Pears heard it break.

“Did you see that?” someone said in the flat. “Far out!”

Cretins, Pears snarled. Tears were streaming between Andrew’s fingers, Linda was trying to comfort him and fighting to pull his hands away from his face, Chris was hurrying upstairs, irritably shouting, “What’s going on?” Pears opened the front gate; wet flakes of rust chafed beneath his fingers. He stopped to pick up the doll. Then he recoiled.

The fog had dimmed the streetlights. The shadow of the doll was blurred, the wet road was uneven. He wasn’t really seeing a thick dark lumpy fluid, seeping slowly from the doll’s cracked head.

The fog was muttering; the sound grew into an open-mouthed snarl. A car swung into the road. Pears reached for the doll, then he pulled back his hand and ran toward the house. Behind him he heard the car grind the doll into splinters.

Andrew had heard it too; Chris was trying to calm him down. “Will you stay out of this!” she shouted. Pears gladly took the order for himself. He went into the living-room. Beyond the garden the privet leaves looked thick, coated with fog; he knew how they felt. He drew the curtains and sat in the bay window.

When Chris came down, she stared at him. He frowned enquiringly. If she didn’t say what she was thinking, they couldn’t talk about it. His mind seemed clearer now; he relaxed, smiling. She sat opposite him, shaking her head. The subdued children trudged into the next room, the playroom; Linda whispered. “It’s not my job to run this family single-handed,” Chris said.

“I never said it was.”

“But you act it. If you don’t intend to help, at least don’t make things more difficult.”

She sounded weary. “Have you a migraine?” Pears said.

“It’s taken you long enough to notice.”

“I’m not feeling too well myself. I expect that hasn’t helped my behaviour.”

“Your behaviour isn’t that unusual.”

This was hardly the time to discuss it; if she felt as odd as he did, they would only end up screaming. He moved his chair out of the bay and switched on the television.

He found he couldn’t watch for long. The image whirred silently, as his eyes refused to aid the illusion of continuous movement. Black-faced minstrels danced and sang, hurtling forward to fill the bulging screen, grimacing with painted lips. Pears reached for the switch. “I’m listening to that,” Chris said. He sank back and gazed at the fire. On the edge of his vision colours boiled beneath glass, as if an aquarium had gone mad.

The fire swayed gently, flickering high and vanishing. When he emerged from

his reverie, the programme had been ousted by another. A sandy brown desert, a bright amber sky; the colours didn't clamour for attention. Calm now, he looked. Men in khaki shorts were gently spading out a pit. Archaeologists? Two of them were coaxing something from the soil. He leaned closer.

It came up with its arms held stiff at its sides, its skin pulled back from a yellowing, fixed smile. The pit was surrounded by fleshless bodies, rigidly contorted or lying supine with their lips wrenched back as if by hooks, grinning.

"So far, the mass graves have yielded at least five hundred dead," an announcer was pronouncing. The camera tilted up to show that it had been keeping back a vista of ranked corpses as far as the horizon. In the next room the children were putting toys away. "I don't think we should risk the children seeing this," he said, turning to Chris. As he spoke something moved to the edge of the screen and emerged into the room.

A shadow, of course. When Pears glared at the corner where it had halted, there was nothing. How could television cast a shadow? It must have come from the street. The screen piled up with swarms of brown emaciated manikins. Their dried-out sockets were turned to the sun, their jaws protruded through their skins. He surged out of his chair and switched off the television.

All he achieved was to send the announcer into hiding. "There are almost certainly further graves to be discovered," the man continued, muffled now, as if he'd put his hand over his mouth. Not until Pears heard someone shout, "Jesus, that's sick. Turn it off!" did he realise that the voice was persisting in the flat through the wall.

He slumped back, and began to cough. Had the fog managed to insinuate itself into the room? There was a faint, unpleasant smell. In the corner a faint shadow remained—an after-image, of course. The smell reminded him of old meat, but wasn't quite like that. Had a mouse died beneath the floor? He'd look tomorrow—he didn't feel at all like searching now. "I think we'd all benefit from an early night," he said. "It's past their bedtimes, anyway."

"Do what you want," Chris said.

Andrew was morosely obedient, and Linda made only a token protest; yet Pears found himself becoming irritable. Suppose Chris noted the smell, what might she find? Nothing, for God's sake. Get to bed.

Reading his mood, the children allowed themselves to be herded quickly to the bathroom. Pears stood outside as they splashed; Linda was trying to wheedle Andrew into her game. We aren't such a bad family, Pears thought. I can hold Chris, we don't need to talk.

Abruptly Linda was out of the bathroom. She ran naked to him, towelled pink, her bald pubes and tentatively swelling breasts framed in her tan, and put her

arms around him. "Carry me to bed," she pleaded.

Her hair was warm beneath his chin. She moved against him, soft to his touch, instinctive and guileless as a young animal. As she gazed up at him, sleepy and innocently sensuous she looked exactly as Chris sometimes did. For a moment of illusion she was Chris, renewed.

"Not tonight, love," he said. "Your mother and I aren't feeling very well."

He smacked her bottom gently. She wriggled with delight, gazing at him.

Suddenly he pushed her away. "Go on, now," he said, close to panic. "We want to get to bed."

He hurried into the bathroom. "Finish your teeth quickly, Andrew, and I'll tuck you in." He leaned against the wall, his nails squeaking on the tiles. As soon as Andrew had closed the door, Pears was seized by a violent and prolonged orgasm.

He lay in bed, making a lair of the darkness. Even there he wasn't safe. When he closed his eyes, grinning faces floated up, plump and sticky. Suppose Chris wanted him to make love to her? That was often the way they expunged their arguments. He could hear her scrubbing the blood from the wall.

Her climbing footsteps seemed to take forever, as if she were sadistically prolonging her approach. She knows, he thought. I've broadcast to her what I've done. He pressed himself as near to his edge of the bed as he could, pretending to sleep.

He held himself still as she slipped into bed. Too still. He moved slightly, muttering. "Hugh?" she said. He glared into the darkness, grinding his teeth silently. "Hugh, listen," she said.

He turned over violently. "What is it?" He hadn't meant to shout.

"Nothing," she said, turning away.

"No, what is it?"

"It doesn't matter."

He could feel her turning restlessly for hours. He held himself rigid, willing her to sleep. She turned against him, rubbery; the bed felt like a tropical tent. When at last she was quiet, he couldn't be sure she wasn't pretending. He didn't dare leave the bed in case he disturbed her. Fog hung in the gap between the curtains, glowing feebly, thick and blank as his mind. His eyes itched hotly. He gazed at nothing.

At breakfast his eyes felt bloated and raw. Around dawn the chattering of birds had suddenly toppled with him into sleep. He stared at his plate. His knife sliced a poached egg; yellow liquid leaked from its pupil. The sounds of Chris and the children nagged at him, annoying as radio voices bumbling against an

exhausted battery. He didn't know how he would be able to face work.

"I don't want to go to school today," Andrew said. "I don't feel well."

"Neither do I," Linda said.

"What's the matter with you?" Chris demanded.

They looked at each other, baffled. "Come on, both of you," she said. "No nonsense. Once you come home tonight, you've the whole weekend."

Pears forced himself to look at them directly. They were rummaging for an argument. "Listen, don't fret," he told them. "It won't be so bad, once you're there. I don't always want to go out in the mornings, you know. I don't this morning. But we have to go."

"And what about me?" Chris demanded angrily. "Do you think it's a picnic for me to go shopping, the way they look at you round here? It's an effort of will, I assure you."

He stared at her. "Only last week you said you liked these shops."

She was flushed with anger that she'd let her feelings show. "Well, that's how I feel now," she said defiantly.

"Well," he said, glancing at his watch. "Time's getting on. If I go now, I can walk up with you two. Are you coming?" he asked Chris, rather discouragingly: her revelation had annoyed him, for he didn't know how to handle it.

"I've the washing-up to do. I'll manage, don't worry." When he hesitated she said, "I've told you not to worry about me."

Fog was blocking the way just outside the gate, a dull featureless thug. Behind the thickening grey screen, the privet leaves looked fat and plastic. Pears could see nothing he would be able to bear to touch. He gazed back down the hall, past the dining-table to Chris at the sink, and almost retreated. Then he urged the children out. Glancing back at their bright orange curtains, which looked shabby now with fog, he caught sight of the young man in the flat, gazing apathetically through the uncurtained window.

The hinges of the gate shrieked jaggedly; Pears felt as if the sound were being dragged through his ears. The children waited restlessly. "Go on, then," he said, impatient with everything, and strode out, thinking: I should make them want to go, not bully them.

The fog settled on him like wet cobwebs, drawing him deeper into itself. It closed him in with silence. He could hear no sound from the main road two hundred yards away. His muffled footsteps clopped; he could hardly hear the children's. Andrew and Linda were diluted, dissolving smudgily into the fog.

Odd blurs bobbed past: the mirror of a parked car, the overhanging tips of a tree. They faded, and the street seemed to fade with them. He was alone with fog. It closed on his face like a cold soft mask, trickling thickly into his lungs. A

single paving-stone repeated itself underfoot, again and again, in a frame of fog. He couldn't see the children now. He began coughing uncomfortably. Nor could he hear them.

He gagged himself with one hand, and strained his ears. All his senses were muffled; his mouth and nose felt stuffed with wet smoke. The flat inexorable wall of fog stood close to him, boxing him in. He opened his mouth to shout, but it filled with a foggy cough. The children had gone.

As he fought to speak, a dreadful suspicion choked him. He and the children hadn't been alone in the fog. There had been a hulking shape that had paced them just behind the blinding wall, waiting until they became separated. He could feel its stealthy presence now, somewhere near. Its hands had grabbed the children's mouths. It had dragged the children into an alley and stuffed gags into their mouths. Now it was turning to Linda—

He heard the children's muffled screams.

For a moment he was fog, fluid, helpless. Then he smashed his way blindly forward, toward the cries. The grey slammed against his eyes, then fell back, acquiring an orange tinge. The children were waiting beneath the sodium lights of the main road, giggling nervously. Traffic moved by like a glacier, bleary lights gazing tearfully ahead. He'd never expected to be so glad to see a traffic jam.

The children must have been playing hide and seek in the fog, they must have scared each other. Pears felt angry, and anxious to be sure that that was what had happened. But to interrogate them, or to lose his temper, would only cause further unpleasantness: best to leave it alone. Abruptly, Linda said to Andrew, "I'm sorry I was rude about your doll. I was mean."

"I was growing out of it anyway," Andrew said.

Oddly, they became less reluctant as they neared the school. They ran into the underpass eagerly enough, casting him a last glance as they went, flushed oval portraits in Balaclavas. He strolled to the bank, musing.

They couldn't have left more reluctant to come out than he had. But now, away from the house he felt no reluctance at all. At home they were all caught in a tight spiral of neuroses. Now he saw that, he knew how to free them. They must go away at the weekend, into the countryside. The fog stepped back before him, parting.

He enjoyed the day. He joked with those of his colleagues who seemed gloomily befogged, until their polite smiles broke into spontaneity. He cleared his desk of the convoluted cases which had been gathering, piling up against his mind. He rang Chris at work. She sounded happier, and said she liked the idea of a day out.

He felt affectionate toward everyone he saw or thought of. Almost everyone. He stole a look at the young industrial chemist's account. No salary cheque had been received this month, and the account was overdrawn. So that's why he sits around all day.

Walking home, Pears felt ashamed of his snooping. It hadn't even gained him anything. He hardly knew the man; he'd spoken to him only once, to ask him to subdue a howling guitar at midnight. These days the chemist's flat was usually silent—*inert* was more the word. As he reached his road, Pears saw the chemist drive away in a van by one of the friends who'd visited him last night. Pears couldn't help feeling glad to see him go.

At dinner the children cheered the proposal of a day out. "I did feel odd yesterday," Pears said. "And this morning too. It must have been something I ate. Didn't you feel odd, Chris?"

"You know I had a migraine. I don't know about anything else."

"What about you two?" But they didn't know what he meant any more than Chris seemed to; and when he remembered how he'd felt it seemed healthier to forget.

The next day was cold and bright. They drove into North Wales. Slate hills were silver against pastel blue, white wafery clouds streaked the horizons. They parked in a village whose name they stumbled over, laughing helplessly. The village seemed full of slim spires, of churches built of plump bricks of creamy dough around rose windows. They sat outside a pub, watching tractors pass, a market in the street opposite, a pony cantering by. "I wish I had a book about ponies," Linda said.

They bought her one, and *Watership Down* for Andrew. As they walked back to the car, Chris said, "Do you think there's a hotel?" There was: two cottages knocked together, with a double room and a single free. "I bet you are called Mrs Jones," Linda told the landlady, who was. Andrew ran upstairs to read his book, and later they had to open the bedroom door to let the smell of dinner tempt him down.

After dinner, they walked through the village. The streets were full of greetings and good-nights; distant windows came alight on the hills. An elderly couple said good night to them. They put the children to bed. Glancing through Andrew's book, Pears found a poem which he thought was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever read. He read it aloud to them, letting himself go completely into the poem and into the children's eyes; by the end he was almost in tears. The children said good night quietly. Later Chris and he made love tenderly, unhurried, tranquil. They lay and felt the wide night calm around them.

"Now I think about it, you were right," Chris said. "I did feel strange on

Thursday."

"In what way?"

She was asleep as soon as she'd said, "I don't know why, I was jealous of you and Linda."

On Sunday Mrs Jones invited them to visit a friend's farm. The farmer's children were playing on a collapsed haystack. Andrew and Linda plunged into it shouting, pleading with their parents to join them. Urged on by Mrs Jones and her friends, Pears and Chris climbed the stack, pretending reluctance. At the top Linda began tickling Pears to make him roll down. Feeling her small fingers move over him, he froze for a moment. Then he retaliated, and while Andrew played with the other children—bringing him out of himself, Pears thought, good—he and Linda set about Chris. They rolled to the bottom entangled, laughing.

The farmer's wife insisted they stay for dinner. They drove home leisurely, through thin drifts of mist. The children slept in the back, nestling against Chris. Whenever he caught her eye in the mirror she smiled gently. Even Liverpool seemed refreshed by their outing; the long carriageway of Tuebrook was polished clean by frost and sodium light. The yellow paintwork of their house surged forward from the terrace to greet them. The flat next door was dark. Pears couldn't remember ever having been so pleased to return home.

On Monday evening he hurried home. Chris wouldn't be back for an hour, the children were staying late at school for recorder practice. He'd had enough of the rusty gate. The tin of paint nudged his thigh. Paint now, oil tomorrow. Fog unrolled the street like a carpet for him, yards ahead. A light appeared in the flat next door. He didn't bother looking.

He'd climbed to the loft in search of a paint-brush when the sound began. It was a low rumbling, almost inaudible; for a while he wasn't sure he heard it. Dust stirred wakefully in the dim charred light beneath the roof. The sound seemed to be deep in the walls; momentarily the uncoloured shapes around him in the loft appeared to be vibrating. Surely it couldn't be thunder. Of course, it was a plane approaching overhead.

He had just climbed down to the landing when he felt the sound inside him.

It was growing there. It was a huge rusty lump of metal, sharp-cornered and jagged, exploding slowly from the centre of his cranium, forcing its dull saw-toothed way out through his ears. He could taste it. His mouth tasted full of coins.

Don't let it be starting again! Please, no!

He rushed for the stairs. Downstairs he wouldn't be so close to the sound. But he had to halt at the top, clutching at the banister, for he was plummeting toward

the hall like a plane out of control. As he'd moved, his head had gone hurtling uncontrollably forward and down, as if on a cable. Within him metal rasped heavily.

By the time he reached the hall, gripping the banister and holding himself immobile on each step while his momentum subsided, the plane was fading. He sank gingerly into a chair in the living-room. The sound drained lazily away, a murmur, a whisper, cold and rough in his head; he couldn't tell when it began to persist only in his imagination. He sat still. If he didn't move nothing else would happen. It would all fade, he would feel it go and know when it was safe to move. The walls held themselves still, almost trembling with the effort.

Soon he felt there was nothing wrong except the fog which now had night on its side. The privet hedge was sliced thin by a block of grey. He stood up to draw the curtains, but fell back into his chair. There was something out there he must watch for, to be prepared when it came. Each time he looked the fog had inched more of his surroundings into itself.

Because the window was closed he didn't hear them coming. The fog within the gateway stirred. The small forms were rising to the surface. They came slowly, like bodies floating up from grey mud. He heard the faint clang of the gate, then they were rushing toward the house. They came to the window and peered in at him, mouthing. Then a key was scrabbling at the front door.

He knew their names, Andrew and Linda. But that didn't help. He struggled to grasp memories before they came in. Andrew was both younger and older than his age, prone to trip over his own feet, over-sensitive. No use. Pears was coldly analysing a stranger, and every phrase was a cliche. And Linda—

Memory deluged him, one image smashing against him again and again. Oh my God. Oh my God. How could he have had such feelings about a ten-year-old child, his own daughter? Even worse, how could he have tried to ignore them, forget them, pretend he'd meant Chris all the time? What was he becoming? Or had this secret self been waiting within him all the time?

Linda ran in, flushed, excited. "Bet you can't guess what we did today," she said.

She was all freed hair and pink flesh, palpitating. He clenched his fists down the sides of his chair, gouging his palms, trying to lock in a threatened explosion of nausea. "Tell me, tell me later," he managed to say. "Go and play."

"But I wanted to tell you," she said, hurt.

"Not now." Each time he spoke, another voice, muffled, joined him in chorus. It was his own. He tried to ignore it long enough to speak. "Go, go on," he stammered.

Their sounds in the playroom annoyed him like the bumbling of flies but at

least he'd avoided further speech. He stared emptily at the encroaching fog. He wasn't going mad, he wasn't. But he couldn't bear to think that what he'd been experiencing was real. Yet if he were going mad the horror was himself, dragging him deeper, saving its worst until all his defences were down—not yet even hinting at its worst His thoughts slithered, eluding him. He wasn't mad. But there were states of mind similar to madness. Suddenly he knew he'd been drugged.

How? In food. The chemist next door—Nonsense. He had neither opportunity nor motive. Detectives always looked for those. But Pears had detected a drug in himself, however it had got there. Chris, experimenting on behalf of the hospital—Rubbish. It was temporary. Bearable. Drugs didn't drive sane people mad, drugs couldn't overcome a strong mind, a mind that wouldn't weaken, that was in control, they couldn't. Perhaps Chris could determine what drug it was, and the antidote. The wall of fog shifted forward, hanging dull and slack, leaving only a cramped strip of dark bedraggled lawn.

The children muttered in the playroom blurred. Pears lay back gingerly; his head felt thin-shelled, rocking with liquid. He closed his eyes and let sounds pass him by: Andrew's toy train rattling on its cramped line, Linda's padding bare-socked footsteps, Linda's voice. His eyes sprang wide, glaring.

"I want the bunny." That was all she'd said. A frayed stuffed rabbit sat in the corner of the playroom, the children rarely bothered with it now. But Linda had just asked for it.

She hadn't really said, "He wants to fuck me."

Or perhaps she had. After all, she needn't have meant her father. Of course she hadn't meant him, Pears thought, his face burning. Then whom had she meant? God, surely nobody! She had just been trying out the word, as children do.

She could have meant Pears. Young girls were supposed to go through a period of sexual love for the father. But wasn't she too young? Perhaps not: perhaps hidden in her mind were pictures of her father pulling off her clothes, his huge hairy body pressing down on her, forcing her wider—

He leapt up snarling. But his rage relieved him of nothing. He had to know. All he could hear now was what he thought she'd said. He strode into the hall, and balked. What could he say? He couldn't accuse her directly in case his mind had tricked him. But why should his mind play that particular trick? He stood, trying to force himself forward; his hands felt bloated, and spiky with sweat. Andrew's voice squeaked. The playroom door hung immobile, smugly threatening. Linda answered.

She'd said, "We want to stick these blocks up here." She hadn't said—innocent? pretending? Some building blocks were scattered amid the clutter on

the floor, but he demanded, "What were you saying?"

When Linda gazed at him, perhaps without guile, and opened her mouth, he interrupted savagely, "You know what I mean. Just now. What were you saying?"

She looked uneasy now. "I don't know. What was I saying?"

"Leave Andrew out of it, don't try and make him answer for you. Don't drag him into it, you little—"

Her eyes were wider, rimmed with moisture. In a minute she would run to him in tears. He couldn't bear to have her near him. If she touched him. "All right. All right. It doesn't matter," he stammered, to escape. "Just keep quiet," he said, and slammed the door.

He couldn't shake off the suspicion that Linda had got the better of him. She had seduced him again: into silence. She was knowing, evil; her body was. It was taking over, possessing the little girl he'd loved. He mustn't think of her.

The fog had fitted to the windows like the backing of a mirror. A dull discoloured lump of flesh sat in his reflected armchair, staring at him. They were still gazing at each other when he heard Chris' key in the lock.

Fear burned through him. The children might tell her how he'd behaved. She'd known he was going wrong again. His eyes might betray him if she looked closely; drugs were supposed to show in the eyes. If her terror were added to his the onslaught would disintegrate him completely.

Wasn't he looking at it the wrong way? The inspiration lifted him to his feet. Being near her should help. It was exactly what he needed. He hurried after her, into the kitchen.

"Hello," he said. "I was going to paint the gate but the fog came down. I'll do it tomorrow without fail. I'll make myself if I have to. Not that I'll have lost interest." He was saying too much, too fast, trying to outrun his muffled other voice. "Do you like that colour paint? Never mind, don't answer, you must be tired. Was your day all right?

"It was all right." She sounded a little weary. "You can get your own drink, Andrew. Don't start nibbling, Linda, dinner won't be long."

He avoided looking at the children. "Can I help you at all? Have you a migraine?"

"No, not yet." But all of a sudden Pears had. Perhaps she was in fact suffering secretly; but he was experiencing it directly. Perhaps he was imagining what migraine felt like. All he knew was that open metallic sores were burning coldly through his scalp; his cranium felt like a raw wound. Yet somehow he wasn't yet feeling the pain. If he weren't with Chris it might fade. "You don't want me to do anything, do you?" he gabbled, hurrying away, his scalp corroding.

He'd managed to attune himself to the fog, to its untroubled colourless calm, when Chris called him to dinner. He walked down the hall, bearing his calm carefully. That telephone is red. That wall is yellow. No need to touch them with his mind.

In the dining-room area he found he felt invulnerable. He smiled surreptitiously. The effect was wearing off. He raised a forkful of dinner to his mouth.

He couldn't taste it. He almost reached into his mouth with the fork to examine the food. Lamb chop, mint sauce, potatoes, sprouts; no taste of any of them, just solids moving in his mouth. It was all right. No need to strain. This was only reaction against what he'd been suffering, what did they call it, sensory overload.

He chewed. Linda was gazing toward him as she ate.

He'd been chewing for hours. Linda gazed at him.

He chewed faster. Faster, faster. No use: he couldn't make Linda move. His time was slowing to a halt. Each moment was only a fraction of the one before. They would never add up to the next; he was trapped in this moment forever. And Linda's pictures of him were creeping toward his mind. "What are you doing?" he shouted. "What do you think you're staring at?"

Linda gasped. "I was just thinking."

Oh no, she couldn't trick him again so easily. Her gaze had been slowing him down, as though time were amber. "Ah," he snarled triumphantly. "And just what were you thinking, eh? Would it have been about me?"

"I was just thinking about my recorder. I played a whole page, today." She was nearly crying.

Chris was staring at him. If he went on, she might suspect what had happened to him on Thursday night—when Linda had got the better of him. She mustn't know that, nobody must know, he must wipe it out of his mind. "All right," he told Linda abruptly. "It doesn't matter. Get on with your dinner."

Faces gazed at him. "I'm sorry," he said, to turn them away. "All right!" he shouted. "I'm sorry! I am sorry," he said quietly. Maybe Linda had been telling the truth. At least he'd escaped the trap of the dwindling moment, though his time still felt more intolerably stretched than it had since his childhood. Perhaps that was how Linda's time felt too.

Having eaten all he could, he retreated to the living-room. He lay back in its stillness, letting its shapes and colours lie on his eyes. If he didn't move they would stay still. But they grew harsh, alert. Someone was coming down the hall.

He'd forgotten: he had to get through an entire evening with Chris and the children. Surely the effect would fade before then. He had only to keep still,

calm.

Chris read while the children watched television. They were pretending. They knew something was wrong with him, they were watching covertly, until he betrayed himself. But he wasn't going to. Let them watch how calm he was. He closed his eyes.

Which sprang open. Rushing up from their depths there had been a doll whose head was cracked wetly like an egg of blood, a doll with Andrew's face. As Pears glared at Andrew, he glimpsed the cracks fading into the boy's hair.

Worse was waiting for his eyes to close. He stared at the television. Too hectic. He stared at the palely coffee-coloured wall. If he kept his eyes open the images would die away. His eyes twinged, smarting, and he blinked.

Linda sailed up, naked, posturing, ready to engulf him. He gasped, then tried to smile convincingly: he could just have woken from a doze, they couldn't prove anything. He blinked. Chris flashed out at him and was etched on his mind. All her nerves were laid bare; small sharp hooks like dentist's instruments plucked at them. Her head was a mass of buried razor-blades.

He sprang from his chair and stumbled upstairs. If he couldn't see the three of them they wouldn't be able to provoke these nightmares. He lay on the bed. Ahead hung the window, a faint grey smudged rectangle. It was receding from him.

Instead of yielding more light to his eyes it grew fainter, dwindling. The bedroom was enormous and very dark. The floor was crowded with figures, creeping lopsidedly toward him on all fours. The heads of the foremost, grey blurred ovals, were peering at him over the edge of the bed.

Little of his scream escaped between his fingers. His other hand groped for the light-switch, found something, switched it on. The room was defiantly bare. He examined that fact for a long time, until he felt it might be true. The depths of his mind waited for him. It was only a temporary lull. The tide would flood back soon. Each time it returned it was more overpowering.

He was descending the stairs, which felt still in the way a booby-trap might, when a terrible certainty gripped him. The effects must wear off eventually, no drug could last for the rest of one's life; but his nightmares must be imprinted on the house. Exactly as if some dreadful tragedy had happened there, the house was haunted now.

His gaze was drawn to the hall wallpaper. It was faintly speckled with a brownish stain. Blood. That was the beginning of the nightmare, when he'd seen the accident victim. If he could wipe off the last of the blood perhaps it would erase the imprint of his terror. Sickly he felt that the walls were soft within, as if subtly corrupted from their core, by the haunting; but he bent closer.

Peering, he wasn't sure whether the spots were blood or shadow. He sniffed the wall. Still unsure, he touched the stain with his tongue. A faint metallic taste: blood. Before he knew what he intended he was supporting himself, palms flat against the wall, while he licked avidly, searching for the taste.

He threw himself back, but couldn't escape himself. Maybe, he thought in a desperate bid for distraction, that's what the dopey chemist thought I meant to do when he saw me in the hall. Now his fantasy's true.

Chris and the children looked up when he opened the door. His face froze. He didn't know what expression he wore, but dared not alter it in case his face betrayed his terror. A tight mask he'd never seen before was clamped on him. As he paced to his seat the mask tugged painfully at his face, determined to reshape itself. He sat down and had to pass his hand over his face, as if brushing away sweat, in order to change the mask.

"You don't feel well, do you," Chris said. He managed to shake his grinning head. "You ought to lie down," she said.

He realised fully how helpless and alone he was. "No!" he shouted.

"You two had better go and play."

"I want them here." He wanted to keep an eye on Linda. "Stay here," he told them.

He seemed to have earned himself a lull. Someone was knocking and ringing the bell next door, but he could bear that. Now they were banging on the window of the ground-floor flat, several of them talking in low voices. "Come on," one said. "I can't stand this." Pears was glad to hear someone else feeling that, for a change. They were going; the gate clanked. He looked up, smiling emptily, and saw Linda gazing beyond him in horror.

He twisted about. A dark blotch was scuttering over the wall, hectic tendrils quivering. It was—it was a crane-fly; its legs fluttering hysterically, as if in a dying paroxysm. Still the lull. It scuttled into a corner. "I'll get it," he told Chris. She usually dealt with intruding insects; this time he'd do it, to show that he could.

He had trapped the whirring fly, it was trembling violently yet feebly in his fist like an essence of terror, when he glimpsed Chris' expression.

At once she was thrusting the poker deeper into the fire. He opened the window and released the fly, then he gazed at the fog, trying to understand. She wasn't frightened of insects. Then he knew: he'd projected his own fading terror onto her face. His nightmare had lent her a mask. He sat down, smiling at her.

When he looked away her weak smile collapsed into naked terror.

This time her smile wasn't swift enough. He forced himself to look behind him at the corner toward which she'd been glaring. He wouldn't panic, he'd

fought through, the effect was fading, vanquished. But as he turned, a faint smell of something like meat touched his nostrils.

The corner was bare. He felt weak with relief, yet uneasily baffled. Briefly he'd dreamed that he was infecting Chris. He must have been right before: he was simply imposing the last of his terror on his perception of her. Mightn't that show that the terror was leaving him? He glanced at her.

She smiled at him. She smiled. She was almost convincing. But he knew what was happening, and reality parted beneath him. The smell filled his nostrils. She hadn't been looking at the corner, but at him. He had already smelled what she smelled: himself. Behind her smile her eyes were transfixed by slivers of growing horror. As if her eyes were mirrors he could see what she saw.

In his chair she saw an eyeless face of mottled bone, grinning at her through its gaping cheeks.

At last he managed to look down at his hand. He felt his neck-bone creak. His hand was still flesh. But he could feel his corpse. It was inside him, slowly corroding its way to the surface, a core of numbness spreading outward, reaching lazily for him. It was unhurried. It had as much time as he.

He suppressed his scream, even though it would say he was still alive. There was worse to come, he realised almost dispassionately. He looked at Andrew and Linda, watching television, sitting still. Still as corpses.

Suddenly he knew, gazing at their immobile faces on which colours flickered lightly, that they were feeling rigor mortis stake its claim on them. Death was squeezing their windpipes experimentally, like a witch in a dream. But it was no dream, for he could smell them. It must be terror that was fluttering trapped in their eyes.

All he could do was close his own. It no longer mattered what was waiting in there. Anything would be more bearable than the sight of his dead children. He closed them out.

Blank.

White.

Nothing.

When he opened his eyes, feeling purged and somehow released, he was in a room with three strangers.

There was a woman, and a small imitation of her: a girl, less haggard, pinker, more plump. There was a small boy who reminded him vaguely of someone. All three of them were pretending his presence in the room was natural—pretending that they knew who this man was. But they didn't, any more than he did.

They were watching him surreptitiously. He had to get out before they moved on him, the stranger. But they would never let him reach the door unless he

defended himself.

He caught sight of the poker. Half of it was buried in the fire and red-hot, but the handle was insulated. He stood up gingerly and began to move stealthily toward the fire. He felt the three of them pretending not to watch him. If he used the weapon he would have to close his eyes, though he wouldn't be able to close his ears.

He had to escape. He inched toward the poker, trying to seem casual, aimless. For a moment he was surrounded by the three; his held breath burned in him. But they didn't leap.

The presence of the young girl disturbed him most of all. She was his greatest danger. There was something in her he must destroy; her freshness was deceitful, her soft plumpness was a snare. She was like the walls of the house, whose corrupted cores oozed now, thick with evil. Her innocence was disgusting, intolerable, false. He'd make sure her body could never again lure anyone. He stooped to the fire. As the poker stirred, its nest of cinders fell open, brightening.

Something came howling toward the house.

He jerked and almost fell. He stumbled to the window, knocking the television askew. They'd trapped him in his room until the howling came for him. He shouldered the clinging curtains aside and wrenched up the sash. The howling growled into silence.

A blue glow pulsed through the fog. The fog's dead heart was beating. It took him minutes to discern a blue will-o'-the-wisp, flashing sluggishly. Uniformed men strode toward him out of the fog. No, they were heading for the next house.

He turned to watch, and came face to face with a pinched white almost fleshless mask, peering through the neighbouring window.

It was his own reflection. No: it was his enemy, the man who'd been trying to drive him mad. At last Pears had found him. Now he would make him suffer.

Pears was trying to remember where he'd put the poker when the uniformed men closed around his enemy. Pears snarled in frustration. The white mask was still as they lifted the body to its feet, but the body was breathing.

They could have him, so long as they used the poker on him. Pears would give them his. He turned, but the ambulance had gone.

He was staring emptily at the fog when the chemist's friends returned. They were the three he'd seen on Thursday night. He could remember. He let memories drift back as they might, hoping he wouldn't remember anything he couldn't bear.

One of the young men hurried into the flat and rummaged in a rickety chest of drawers. He snatched out a piece of paper, and something else. He moved offstage, and Pears heard a toilet flushing.

As he emerged, one of his friends demanded, "Have you got the formula?"

Pears tried to control himself, but already was screaming with laughter. The three glanced sharply at him. "I'm sorry," he gasped, weeping, and was hoarse with laughter again. He ran out, ashamed and spasmodically hilarious, to explain if he could.

One frowned at him from beneath a red mock-leather cap and edged away. "Don't get paranoid," said the one who'd entered the flat. "We aren't going to make this stuff. Neither is anyone else," and he tore up the piece of paper minutely. The fragments swarmed away on the hint of a wind.

"He'd freaked out completely, that guy in there," the third said, winding his long scarf tautly into his fists. "We had to call the ambulance."

"He'd synthesised a new trip," the man in the red cap chattered, released apparently from guilt into speech. "It was too much. It got worse every time you tripped. But he said it was worth learning how to control it!"

"The last one was so bad we took him away for the weekend. We thought we'd persuade him off it. But tonight he was even deeper into it."

"I never took any," said the man with the stretched scarf. "But I was picking up his trip while we were waiting. It was that powerful, being near him could turn you on even if you hadn't taken any. It was bad. We had to call the ambulance."

"I think you had," Pears reassured him, feeling his surroundings start the long slow fall back into familiarity. He remembered the face he'd seen carried away. The eyes had been sunken, passive, immobile, at the mercy of whatever passed before or within them. They had looked exactly like red-cracked glass.

Weeks later he told Chris some of what had happened, and why. Perhaps she believed him. "Did you feel any of it?" he asked. "Anything at all?"

"I don't know."

"Anything you can describe?"

"No."

Perhaps she was telling the truth; he couldn't be sure. Had she forgotten her jealousy of Linda? If so, what should that convey to him? How should he react? Since his experience he seemed to be approaching decisions more and more gently and circuitously, and making fewer.

He carried the paint and brush down the hall. Today would be the rusty gate's last day. The children shouted in the playroom. Had they felt any of it? How could he find out? It would be better to let them forget. Besides, he seemed to have forgotten all he'd ever learned about how to talk to them.

"The shuttlecock's under the stairs," Linda said, muffled.

So it was, behind a tangle of nesting chairs. Andrew ran into the hall, bursting into brighter colour as he entered the path of sunlight. He stooped beneath the stairs, but shrank back at once. "I can't find it," he called, his voice unnaturally high.

What had the boy flinched from? "There it is, Andrew," Pears said, and handed him the shuttlecock.

When Andrew had gone Pears forced himself to stoop beneath the stairs again. Under his hand the wall felt thin, a crust over softness. He made himself look at what he'd glimpsed from the corner of his eye.

It was snarling silently from the dark corner where the underside of the stairs met the floor. It was pale and smooth, and had no eyes that he could see. A mat of grey hair like a lump of dust hung over most of the face. Its mouth was huge and red with an unbroken ring of teeth, gibbous with rage.

He managed to save the tin of paint before it fell, and saw at once what the face must be. Someone had wiped a splotch of red paint with a wad of paper. The matted hair was a tangle of dust.

But the corner was bare. There was no paper beneath the stairs, and the corner was clean of dust.

TOURING by Gardner Dozois, Jack Dann, and Michael Swanwick

A three-author collaboration is not something the reader happens upon just every day, and it's even rarer to find one that's a successful story. "Touring" is that rarest of the rare—a unified creation of three different minds. As Gardner Dozois explains: "A three-way collaboration is weird—like a menage a trois, it's something you wouldn't want to do every day, but it's interesting on an occasional basis."

Gardner Dozois was born in 1947 in Salem, Massachusetts, where he grew up ice-skating on Gallows Hill. He is the author or editor of fourteen books, including the novel, Strangers, and the collection, The Visible Man; he also edits an annual series, Best Science Fiction Stories of the Year. Dozois is also noted as a critic and essayist in the science fiction field. He is currently at work on a novel for Timescape Books, tentatively entitled Flash Point. Unlike many writers, Dozois seems to enjoy collaborations, both as an author and an editor, and often with Jack Dann—as in their recent anthology, Unicorns.

Jack Dann was born in Johnson City, New York in 1945, where he presently resides. Since his first science fiction story in 1970, his short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies; some of these are collected in Time-tipping. He is the author of two novels, Starhiker and Junction, and has finished a third, The Man Who Melted. He has edited seven anthologies, including the recent More Wandering Stars, a follow-up to the notable 1974 anthology, Wandering Stars.

Like Gardner Dozois, Michael Swanwick lives in Philadelphia. Considered one of science fiction's leading new writers, Swanwick has recently sold stories to a number of publications, including the prestigious New Dimensions and Universe anthology series. Born in Schenectady, New York in 1950, Swanwick earned a B.A. in English from William and Mary and has drifted through a variety of jobs ranging from dictionary salesman to low-level bureaucrat. He is currently working on a novel, The Drift. Dozois and Swanwick have also collaborated on several other stories (as have Dozois and Dann), although so far "Touring" is the only one all three have worked on. But this is not the only reason why "Touring" is a most unusual story.

The four-seater Beechwood Bonanza dropped from a gray sky to the cheerless winter runways of Fargo Airport. Tires touched pavement, screeched, and the single-engine plane taxied to a halt. It was seven o'clock in the morning, February 3, 1959.

Buddy Holly duckwalked down the wing and hopped to the ground. It had been a long and grueling flight; his bones ached, his eyes were gritty behind the large, plastic-framed glasses, and he felt stale and curiously depressed. Overnight bag in one hand, laundry sack in the other, he stood beside Ritchie Valens for a moment, looking for their contact. White steam curled from their nostrils. Brown grass poked out of an old layer of snow beside the runway. Somewhere a dog barked, flat and far away.

Behind the hurricane fence edging the field, a stocky man waved both hands overhead. Valens nodded, and Holly hefted his bags. Behind them, J. P. Richardson grunted as he leaped down from the plane.

They walked toward the man across the tarmac, their feet crunching over patches of dirty ice.

"Jack Blemings," the man rasped as he came up to meet them. "I manage the dance hall and the hotel in Moorhead." Thin mustache, thin lips, cheeks going to jowl—Holly had met this man a thousand times before: the stogie in his mouth was inevitable; the sporty plaid hat nearly so. Blemings stuck out a hand, and Holly shuffled his bags awkwardly, trying to free his own hand. "Real pleased to meet you, Buddy," Blemings said. His hand was soggy and boneless. "Real pleased to meet a real artist."

He gestured them into a showroom-new '59 Cadillac. It dipped on its springs as Richardson gingerly collapsed into the backseat. Starting the engine, Blemings leaned over the seat for more introductions. Richardson was blowing his nose but hastily transferred the silk handkerchief into his other hand so that they could shake. His delighted-to-meet-you expression lasted as long as the handshake, then the animation went out of him, and his face slumped back into lines of dull fatigue.

The Cadillac jerked into motion with an ostentatious squeal of rubber. Once across the Red River, which still ran steaming with gunmetal predawn mist, they were out of North Dakota and into Moorhead, Minnesota. The streets of Moorhead were empty—not so much as a garbage truck out yet. "Sleepy little burg," Valens commented. No one responded. They pulled up to an undistinguished six-story brick hotel in the heart of town.

The hotel lobby was cavernous and gloomy, inhabited only by a few tired-looking potted rubber plants. As they walked past a grouping of battered armchairs and sagging sofas toward the shadowy information desk in the back,

dust puffed at their feet from the faded gray carpet. An unmoving ceiling fan cast thin-armed shadows across the room, and everything smelled of old cigar butts and dead flies and trapped sunshine.

The front desk was as deserted as the rest of the lobby. Blemings slammed the bell angrily until a balding, bored-looking man appeared from the back, moving as though he were swimming through syrup. As the desk clerk doled out room keys, still moving like a somnambulist, Blemings took the cigar out of his mouth and said, "I spoke with your road manager, must've been right after you guys left the Surf Ballroom. Needed his okay for two acts I'm adding to the show." He paused. "S'awright with you, hey?"

Holly shrugged. "It's your show," he said.

Holly unlaced one shoe, letting it drop heavily to the floor. His back ached, and the long, sleepless flight had made his suit rumpled and sour smelling. One last chore and he could sleep: he picked up the bedside telephone and dialed the hotel operator for an outside line so that he could call his wife, Maria, in New York and tell her that he had arrived safely.

The phone was dead; the switchboard must be closed down. He sighed and bent over to pick up his shoe again.

Eight or nine men were standing around the lobby when Holly stepped out of the elevator, husky fellows, southern boys by the look of them. Two were at the front desk, making demands of the clerk, who responded by spreading his arms wide and rolling his eyes upward.

Waiting his turn for service, Holly leaned back against the counter, glancing about. He froze in disbelief. Against all logic, all possibility, Elvis Presley himself was standing not six yards away on the gray carpet. For an instant Holly struggled with amazement. Then a second glance told him the truth.

Last year Elvis had been drafted into the army, depriving his fans of his presence and creating a ready market for those who could imitate him. A legion of Presley impersonators had crowded into the welcoming spotlights of stages across the country, trying vainly to fill the gap left by the King of Rock and Roll.

This man, though, he stood out. At first glance he was Elvis. An instant later you saw that he was twenty years too old and as much as forty pounds overweight. There were dissolute lines under his eyes and a weary, dissipated expression on his face. The rigors of being on the road had undone his ducktail so that his hair was an untidy mess, hanging down over his forehead and curling over his ears. He wore a sequined shirt, now wrinkled and sweaty, and a suede jacket.

Holly went over to introduce himself. "Hi," he said, "I guess you're playing

tonight's show."

The man ignored his outthrust hand. Dark, haunted eyes bored into Holly's. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, son," he said. A soft Tennessee accent underlay his words. "But I'm packing a piece, and I know how to use it." His hand darted inside his jacket and emerged holding an ugly-looking .38.

Involuntarily Holly sucked in his breath. He slowly raised his hands shoulder-high and backed away. "Hey, it's okay," he said. "I was just trying to be friendly." The man's eyes followed his retreat suspiciously, and he didn't reholster the gun until Holly was back at the front desk.

The desk clerk was free now. Holly slid three bills across the counter, saying, "Change please." From the corner of his eye, he saw the imitation Elvis getting into the elevator, surrounded by his entourage. They were solicitous, almost subservient. One patted the man's back as he shakily recounted his close call. *Poor old man*, Holly thought pityingly. The man was really cracking under the pressures of the road. He'd be lucky to last out the tour.

In the wooden booth across the lobby, Holly dumped his change on the ledge below the phone. He dialed the operator for long distance. The earpiece buzzed, made clicking noises. Then it filled with harsh, actinic static, and the clicking grew faster and louder. Holly jiggled the receiver, racked the phone angrily.

Another flood of musicians and crew coursed through the lobby. Stepping from the booth, ruefully glancing back at the phone, he collided with a small woman in a full-length mink. "Oof," she said and then reached out and gave him a squeeze to show there were no hard feelings. A mobile, hoydenish face grinned up at him.

"Hey, sport," she said brightly. "I *love* that bow tie. And those glasses—! Jesus, you look just like Buddy Holly!"

"I know," he said wryly. But she was gone. He trudged back to the elevators. Then something caught his eye, and he swung about, openly staring. Was that a *man* she was talking to? My God, he had hair down to his shoulders!

Trying not to stare at this amazing apparition, he stepped into the elevator. Back in his room, he stopped only long enough to pick up his bag of laundry before heading out again. He was going to have to go outside the hotel to find a working phone anyway; he might as well fight down his weariness, hunt up a Laundromat, and get his laundry done.

The lobby was empty when he returned through it, and he couldn't even find the desk clerk to ask where the nearest Laundromat was. Muttering under his breath, Holly trudged out of the hotel.

Outside, the sun was shining brilliantly but without warmth from out of a hard, high blue sky. There was still no traffic, no one about on the street, and

Holly walked along through an early-morning silence broken only by the squeaking of his sneakers, past closed-up shops and shuttered brownstone houses. He found a Laundromat after a few more blocks, and although it was open, there was no one in there either, not even the inevitable elderly Negro attendant. The rows of unused washing machines glinted dully in the dim light cast by a flyspecked bulb. Shrugging, he dumped his clothes into a machine. The change machine didn't work, of course, but you got used to dealing with things like that on the road, and he'd brought a handkerchief full of change with him. He got the machine going and then went out to look for a phone.

The streets were still empty, and after a few more blocks it began to get on his nerves. He'd been in hick towns before—had grown up in one—but this was the sleepiest, *deadest* damn town he'd ever seen. There was still no traffic, although there were plenty of cars parked by the curbs, and he hadn't seen another person since leaving the hotel. There weren't even any *pigeons*, for goodness sake!

There was a five-and-dime on the corner, its doors standing open. Holly poked his head inside. The lights were on, but there were no customers, no floorwalkers, no salesgirls behind the counters. True, small-town people weren't as suspicious as folk from the bigger cities—but still, this *was* a business, and it looked as if anyone could just walk in here and walk off with any of the unguarded merchandise. It was gloomy and close in the empty store, and the air was filled with dust. Holly backed out of the doorway, somehow not wanting to explore the depth of the store for the sales personnel who *must* be in there somewhere.

A slight wind had come up now, and it flicked grit against his face and blew bits of scrap paper down the empty street.

He found a phone on the next corner, hunted through his handkerchief for a dime while the wind snatched at the edges of the fabric. The phone buzzed and clicked at him again, and this time there was the faint, high wailing of wind in the wires, an eerie, desolate sound that always made him think of ghosts wandering alone through the darkness. The next phone he found was also dead, and the next.

Uneasily, he picked up his laundry and headed back to the hotel.

The desk clerk was spreading his hands wide in a gesture of helpless abnegation of responsibility when the fat southerner in the sequined shirt leaned forward, poked a hard finger into the clerk's chest, and said softly, "You know who I am, son?"

"Why, of course I do, Mr. Presley," the clerk said nervously. "Yessir, of course I do, sir."

"You say you know who I am, son," Elvis said in a cottony voice that slowly mounted in volume. "If you know who I am, then you *know* why I don't have to stay in a goddamned flophouse like this! Isn't that right? Would you give your mother a room like that? You know goddamned well you wouldn't. Just what are you people thinking of? I'm *Elvis Presley*, and you'd give me a room like that!"

Elvis was bellowing now, his face grown red and mottled, his features assuming that look of sulky, sneering meanness that had thrilled millions. His eyes were hard and bright as glass. As the frightened clerk shrank back, his hands held up now as much in terror as in supplication, Elvis suddenly began to change. He looked at the clerk sadly, as if pitying him, and said, "Son, do you know who I am?"

"Yessir," whispered the clerk.

"Then can't you see it?" asked Elvis.

"See what, sir?"

"That I'm *chosen!* Are you an atheist? Are you a goddamned atheist?" Elvis pounded on the desk and barked, "I'm the star, I've been given that, and you can't soil it, you atheist bastard! You *sonovabitch!*" Now that was the worst thing he could call anyone, and he never, almost never used it, for Ms mother, may she rest in peace, was holy. *She* had believed in him, had told him that the Lord had chosen *him*, that as long as he sang and believed, the Lord would take care of him. Like this? Is this the way He was going to take care of me?

"*I'm* the star, and I could *buy* this hotel out of my spare change! Buy it, you hear that?" And even as he spoke, the incongruity of the whole situation hit him, really hit him hard for the first time. It was as though his mind had suddenly cleared after a long, foggy daze, as if the scales had fallen from his eyes.

Elvis stopped shouting and stumbled back from the desk, frightened now, fears and suspicions flooding in on him like the sea. What was he doing *here*? Dammit, he was the King! He'd made his comeback, and he'd played to capacity crowds at the biggest concert halls in the country. And now he couldn't even remember how he'd gotten here—he'd been at Graceland, and then everything had gotten all foggy and confused, and the next thing he knew he was climbing out of the bus in front of this hotel with the roadies and the rest of the band. Even if he'd agreed to play this one-horse town, it would have to have been for charity. That's it; it had to be for charity. But then where were the reporters, the TV crews? His coming here would be the biggest damn thing that had ever happened in Moorhead, Minnesota. Why weren't there any screaming crowds being held back by police?

"What in hell's going on here?" Elvis shouted. He snatched out his revolver and gestured to his two bodyguards to close up on either side of him. His gaze

darted wildly about the lobby as he tried to look into every corner at once. “Keep your eyes open! There’s something funny—”

At that moment Jack Blemings stepped out of his office, shut the door smoothly behind him, and sauntered across the musty old carpet toward them. “Something wrong here, Mr. Presley?”

“Damn *right* there is,” Elvis raged, taking a couple of steps toward Blemings and brandishing his gun. “You know how many *years* it’s been since I played a tank town like this? I don’t know what in hell the Colonel was thinking of to send me down here. I—”

Smiling blandly and ignoring the gun, Blemings reached out and touched Elvis on the chest.

Elvis shuddered and took a lurching step backward, his eyes glazing over. He shook his head, looked foggily around the lobby, glanced down at the gun in his hand as though noticing it for the first time, then holstered it absentmindedly. “Time’s the show tonight?” he mumbled.

“About eight, Mr. Presley,” Blemings answered, smiling. “You’ve got plenty of time to relax before then.”

Elvis looked around the lobby again, running a hand through his greased-back hair. “Anything to do around here?” he asked, a hint of the old sneer returning.

“We got a real nice bar right over there the other side of the lobby,” Blemings said.

“I don’t drink,” Elvis said sullenly.

“Well, then,” Blemings added brightly, “we got some real nice pinball machines in that bar, too.”

Shaking his head, Elvis turned and moved away across the lobby, taking his entourage with him.

Blemings went back to his office.

J. P. Richardson had unpacked the Scotch and was going for ice when he saw the whore. There was no mistaking what she was. She was dressed in garish gypsy clothes with ungodly amounts of jewelry about her neck and wrists. Beneath a light blouse her breasts swayed freely—she wasn’t even wearing a bra. Richardson didn’t have to be told how she had earned the mink coat that was draped over one arm.

“Hey, little sister,” Richardson said softly. He was still wearing the white suit that was his onstage trademark, his “Big Bopper” outfit. He looked good in it and knew it. “Are you available?”

“You talking to me, honey?” She spoke defiantly, almost jeeringly, but something in her stance, her bold stare, told Mm she was ready for almost

anything. He discreetly slid a twenty from a jacket pocket, smiled, and nodded.

"I'd like to make an appointment," he said, slipping the folded bill into her hand. "That is, if you *are* available now."

She stared from him to the bill and back, a look of utter disbelief on her face. Then, suddenly, she grinned. "Why, 'course I'm available, sugar. What's your room number? Gimme ten minutes to stash my coat, and I'll be right there."

"It's room four-eleven." Richardson watched her flounce down the hall, and, despite some embarrassment, was pleased. There was a certain tawdry charm to her. Probably ruts like a mink, he told himself. He went back to his room to wait.

The woman went straight to the hotel bar, slapped the bill down, and shouted, "Hey, kids, pony up! The drinks are on Janis!"

There was a vague stirring, and three lackluster men eddied toward the bar.

Janis looked about, saw that the place was almost empty. A single drunk sat walleyed at a table, holding onto its edges with clenched hands to keep from falling over. To the rear, almost lost in gloom, a big stud was playing pinball. Two unfriendly types, who looked like bodyguards, stood nearby, protecting him from the empty tables. Otherwise—nothing. "Shoulda taken the fat dude up on his offer," she grumbled. "There's nothing happening *here*." Then, to the bartender, "Make mine a whiskey sour."

She took a gulp of her drink, feeling sorry for herself. The clatter of pinball bells ceased briefly as the stud lost his ball. He slammed the side of the machine viciously with one hand. She swiveled on her stool to look at him.

"Damn," she said to the bartender. "You know, from this angle that dude looks just like *Elvis*."

Buddy Holly finished adjusting his bow tie, reached for a comb, then stopped in midmotion. He stared about the tiny dressing room, with its cracked mirror and bare light bulbs, and asked himself, *How did I get here?*

It was no idle, existential question. He really did not know. The last thing he remembered was entering his hotel room and collapsing on the bed. Then—here. There was nothing in between.

A rap at the door. Blemings stuck his head in, the stench of his cigar permeating the room. "Everything okay in here, Mr. Holly?"

"Well," Holly began. But he went no further. What could he say? "How long before I go on?"

"Plenty of time. You might want to catch the opener, though—good act. On in ten."

"Thanks."

Blemings left, not quite shutting the door behind him. Holly studied his face

in the mirror. It looked haggard and unresponsive. He flashed a toothy smile but did not feel it. God, he was tired. Being on the road was going to kill him. There had to be a way off the treadmill.

The woman from the hotel leaned into his room. “Hey, Ace—you seen that Blemings motherfucker anywhere?”

Holly’s jaw dropped. To hear that kind of language from a woman—from a *white* woman. “He just went by,” he said weakly.

“Shit!” She was gone.

Her footsteps echoed in the hallway, were swallowed up by silence. And that was *wrong*. There should be the murmur and nervous bustle of acts preparing to go on, last-minute errands being run, equipment being tested. Holly peered into the corridor—empty.

To one side, the hall dead-ended into a metal door with a red EXIT sign overhead. Holly went the other way, toward the stage. Just as he reached the wings, the audience burst into prolonged, almost frenzied applause. The Elvis impersonator was striding onstage. It was a great crowd.

But the wings were empty. No stagehands or go-fers, no idlers, nobody preparing for the next set.

“Elvis” spread his legs wide and crouched low, his thick lips curling in a sensual sneer. He was wearing a gold lame jumpsuit, white scarf about his neck. He moved his guitar loosely, adjusting the strap, then gave his band the downbeat.

*Well it's one for the money
Two for the show
Three to get ready
Now go, cat, go!*

And he was off and running into a brilliant rendition of “Blue Suede Shoes.” Not an easy song to do, because the lyrics were laughable. It relied entirely on the music, and it took a real entertainer to make it work.

This guy had it all, though. The jumps, gyrations, and forward thrusts of the groin were stock stuff—but somehow he made them look right. He played the audience, too, and his control was perfect. Holly could see shadowy shapes beyond the glare of the footlights, moving in a more than sexual frenzy, was astonished by their rapturous screams. All this in the first minutes of the set.

He's good, Holly marveled. Why was he wasting that kind of talent on a novelty act? There was a tug at his arm, and he shrugged it off.

The tug came again. “Hey, man,” somebody said, and he turned to find himself again facing the woman. Their eyes met, and her expression changed oddly, becoming a mixture of bewilderment and outright fear. “Jesus God,” she

said in awe. “You are Buddy Holly!”

“You’ve already told me that,” he said, irritated. He wanted to watch the man on stage—who *was* he, anyway?—not be distracted by this foul-mouthed and probably not very clean woman.

“No, I mean it—you’re *really* Buddy Holly. And that dude on stage”—she pointed—“he’s Elvis Presley.”

“It’s a good act,” Holly admitted. “But it wouldn’t fool my grandmother. That good ol’ boy’s forty if he’s a day.”

“Look,” she said. “I’m Janis Joplin. I guess that don’t mean nothing to *you*, but—hey, lemme show ya something.” She tried to tug him away from the stage.

“I want to see the man’s act,” he said mildly.

“It won’t take a minute, man. And it’s important. I swear it. It’s—you just gotta see it, is all.”

There was no denying her. She led him away, down the corridor to the metal door with its red EXIT sign, and threw it open. “Look!”

He squinted into a dull winter evening. Across a still, car-choked parking lot was a row of faded brick buildings. A featureless gray sky overhung all. “There used ta be a lot more out here,” Janis babbled. “All the rest of the town. It all went away. Can you dig it, man? It just all—went away.”

Holly shivered. This woman was crazy! “Look, Miss Joplin,” he began. Then the buildings winked out of existence.

He blinked. The buildings had not faded away—they had simply ceased to be. As crisply and sharply as if somebody had flipped a switch. He opened his mouth, shut it again.

Janis was talking quietly, fervently. “I don’t know what it is, man, but something *very weird* is going down here.” Everything beyond the parking lot was a smooth, even gray. Janis started to speak again, stopped, moistened her lips. She looked suddenly hesitant and oddly embarrassed. “I mean, like, I don’t know how to break this to ya, Buddy, but you’re *dead*. You bought it in a plane crash way back in ’fifty-nine.”

“This *is* ’fifty-nine,” Holly said absently, looking out across the parking lot, still dazed, her words not really sinking in. As he watched, the cars snapped out of existence row by row, starting with the farthest row, working inward to the nearest. Only the asphalt lot itself remained, and a few bits of litter lying between the painted slots. Holly’s groin tightened, and as fear broke through astonishment, he registered Janis’s words and felt rage grow alongside fear.

“No, honey,” Janis was saying, “I hate to tell ya, but this is 1970.” She paused, looking uncertain. “Or maybe not. Ol’ Elvis looks a deal older than I remember him being. We must be in the future or something, huh? Some kinda sci-fi trip

like that, like on ‘Star Trek’? You think we—”

But Holly had swung around ferociously, cutting her off. “*Stop it!*” he said. “I don’t know what’s going on, what kind of trick you people are trying to play on me, or how you’re doing all these things, but I’m not going to put up with any more of—”

Janis put her hand on Holly’s shoulder; it felt hot and small and firm, like a child’s hand. “Hey, listen,” Janis said quietly, cutting him off. “I know this is hard for you to accept, and it *is* pretty heavy stuff ... but, Buddy, you’re *dead*. I mean, really you are ... It was about ten years ago, you were on tour, right? And your plane *crashed*, spread you *all* over some farmer’s field. It was in all the goddamn papers, you and Ritchie Valens and ...” She paused, startled, and then grinned. “And that fat dude at the hotel, that must’ve been the *Big Bopper*. Wow! Man, if I’d known *that* I might’ve taken him up on it. You were all on your way to some diddlyshit hick town like ...” She stopped, and when she started to speak again, she had gone pale. “... like Moorhead, Minnesota. Oh, Christ, I think it *was* Morehead. Oh, boy, is that spooky ...”

Holly sighed. His anger had suddenly collapsed, leaving him feeling hollow and confused and tired. He blinked away a memory that wasn’t a memory of torn-up black ground and twisted shards of metal. “I don’t *feel* dead,” he said. His stomach hurt.

“You don’t *look* dead, either,” Janis reassured him. “But, honey, I mean, you *really were*.”

They stood staring out across the now vacant parking lot, a cold, cinder-smelling wind tugging at their clothes and hair. At last, Janis said, her brassy voice gone curiously shy, “You got real famous, ya know, after ... afterwards. You even influenced, like, the *Beatles* ... Shit, I forgot—I guess you don’t even know who they *are*, do you?” She paused uncomfortably, then said, “Anyway, honey, you got real famous.”

“That’s nice,” Holly said dully.

The parking lot disappeared. Holly gasped and flinched back. Everything was gone. Three concrete steps with an iron pipe railing led down from the door into a vast, unmoving nothingness.

“What a trip,” Janis muttered. “What a trip ...”

They stared at the oozing gray nothingness until it seemed to Holly that it was creeping closer, and then, shuddering, he slammed the door shut.

Holly found himself walking down the corridor, going no place in particular, his flesh still crawling. Janis tagged along after him, talking anxiously. “Ya know, I can’t even really remember how I got to this burg. I was in L.A. the last I remember, but then everything gets all foggy. I thought it was the booze, but

now I dunno.”

“Maybe you’re dead, too,” Holly said almost absentmindedly.

Janis paled, but a strange kind of excitement shot through her face, under the fear, and she began to talk faster and faster. “Yeah, honey, maybe I am. I thought of that, too, man, once I saw you. Maybe whoever’s behind all this are *magicians*, man, black magicians, and they conjured us all *up*.” She laughed a slightly hysterical laugh. “And you wanna know another weird thing? I can’t find any of my sidemen here or the roadies or *anybody*, ya know? Valens and the Bopper don’t seem to be here either. All of ‘em were at the hotel, but backstage here it’s just you and me and Elvis and that motherfucker Blemings. It’s like *they’re* not really interested in the rest of them, right? They were just window dressing, man, but now they don’t need ‘em anymore, and so they sent them *back*. We’re the headline acts, sweetie. Everybody else *they* vanished, just like they vanished the fucking parking lot, right? Right?”

“I don’t know,” Holly said. He needed time to think. Time alone.

“Or, hey—how about this? Maybe you’re *not* dead. Maybe we got nabbed by flying saucers, and these aliens faked our deaths, right? Snatched you out of your plane, maybe. And they put us together here—wherever here is—not because they dig rock. Shit, they probably can’t even *understand* it—but to study us and all that kinda shit. Or maybe it *is* 1959; maybe we got kidnapped by some time-traveler who’s a big rock freak. Or maybe it’s a million years in the future, and they’ve got us all *taped*, see? And they want to hear us; so they put on the tape, and we *think* we’re here, only we’re not. It’s all a recording. Hey?”

“I don’t know.”

Blemings came walking down the corridor, cigar trailing a thin plume of smoke behind him. “Janis, honey! I been beating the bushes for you, sweetie pie. You’re on in two.”

“Listen, motherfuck,” Janis said angrily. “I want a few answers from you!” Blemings reached out and touched her hand. Her eyes went blank, and she meekly allowed him to lead her away.

“A real trouper, hey?” Blemings said cheerfully.

“Hey!” Holly said. But they were already gone.

Elvis laid down his guitar, whipped the scarf from his neck, and mopped his brow with it. He kissed the scarf and threw it into the crowd. The screams reached crescendo pitch as the little girls fought over its possession. With a jaunty wave of one hand, he walked offstage.

In the wings, he doubled over, breathing heavily. Sweat ran out of every pore in his body. He reached out a hand, and no one put a towel in it. He looked up

angrily.

The wings were empty, save for a kid in big glasses. Elvis gestured weakly toward a nearby piece of terry cloth. "Towel," he gasped, and the kid fetched it.

Toweling off his face, Elvis threw back his head, began to catch his breath. He let the cloth slip to his shoulders and for the first time got a good look at the kid standing before him. "You're Buddy Holly," he said. He was proud of how calmly it came out.

"A lot of people have told me that today," Holly said.

The crowd roared, breaking off their conversation. They turned to look. Janis was dancing onstage from the opposite side. Shadowy musicians to the rear were laying down a hot, bluesy beat. She grabbed the microphone, laughed into it.

"Well! Ain't this a kick in the ass? Yeah. Real nice, real nice." There were anxious lines about her eyes, but most of the audience wouldn't be able to see that. "Ya know, I been thinking a lot about life lately. 'Deed I have. And I been thinkin' how it's like one a dem ole-time blues songs. Ya know? I mean, it *hurts* so bad, and it feels so *good!*" The crowd screamed approval. The band kept on laying down the rhythm. "So I got a song here that kind of proves my point."

She swung an arm up and then down, giving the band the beat, and launched into "Heart and Soul."

"Well?" Elvis said. "Give me the message."

Holly was staring at the woman onstage. "I never heard anyone sing like that before," he murmured. Then, "I'm sorry—I don't know what you mean, Mr. Presley."

"Call me Elvis," he said automatically. He felt disappointed. There had been odd signs and omens, and now the spirits of departed rock stars were appearing before him—there really ought to be a message. But it was clear the kid was telling the truth; he looked scared and confused.

Elvis turned on a winning smile and impulsively plucked a ring from one of his fingers. It was a good ring; lots of diamonds and rubies. He thrust it into Holly's hands. "Here, take this. I don't want the goddamned thing anymore, anyway."

Holly squinted at the ring quizzically. "Well, put it on," Elvis snapped. When Holly had complied, he said, "Maybe you'd better tell me what you *do* know."

Holly told his story. "I understand now," Elvis said. "We're caught in a snare and delusion of Satan."

"You think so?" Holly looked doubtful.

"Squat down." Elvis hunkered down on the floor, and after an instant's hesitation, Holly followed suit. "I've got powers," Elvis explained. "The power to heal—stuff like that. Now me and my momma, we were always close. Real

close. So she'll be able to help us, if we ask her."

"Your mother?"

"She's in Heaven," Elvis said matter-of-factly.

"Oh," Holly said weakly.

"Now join hands and concentrate real *hard*."

Holly felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. Since he was a good Baptist, which he certainly tried to be, the idea of a backstage seance seemed blasphemous. But Elvis, whether he was the real item or not, scared him. Elvis's eyes were screwed shut, and he was saying, "Momma. Can you hear me, Momma?" over and over in a fanatic drone.

The seance seemed to go on for hours. Holly suffering through it in mute misery, listening as well as he could to Janis, as she sung her way through number after amazing number. And finally she was taking her last bows, crowing "Thank you, thank you" at the crowd.

There was a cough at his shoulder and a familiar stench of tobacco. Holly looked up. "You're on," Blemings said. He touched Holly's shoulder.

Without transition, Holly found himself onstage. The audience was noisy and enthusiastic, a good bunch. A glance to the rear, and he saw that the backup musicians were not his regular sidemen. They stood in shadow, and he could not see their faces.

But the applause was long and loud, and it crept up under his skin and into his veins, and he knew he had to play *something*. "Peggy Sue," he called to the musicians, hoping they knew the number. When he started playing his guitar, they were right with him. Tight. It was a helluva good backup band; their playing had bone and sinew to it. The audience was on its feet now, bouncing to the beat.

He gave them "Rave On," "Maybe Baby," "Words of Love," and "That'll be the Day," and the audience yelped and howled like wild beasts, but when he called out "Not Fade Away" to the musicians, the crowd quieted, and he felt a special, higher tension come into the hall. The band did a good, strong intro, and he began singing.

*I wanna tell you how it's gonna be
You're gonna give your love to me*

He had never felt the music take hold of him this immediately, this strongly, and he felt a surge of exhilaration that seemed to instantly communicate itself to the audience and be reflected back at him redoubled, bringing them all up to a deliriously high level of intensity. Never had he performed better. He glanced offstage, saw that Janis was swaying to the beat, slapping a hand against her thigh. Even Elvis was following the music, caught up in it, grinning broadly and

clapping his ring-studded hands.

For love is love and not fade away.

Somewhere to the rear, one of the ghostly backup musicians was blowing blues harmonica, as good as any he'd ever heard.

There was a flash of scarlet, and Janis had run onstage. She grabbed a free mike, and joined him in the chorus. When they reached the second verse, they turned to face each other and began trading off lines. Janis sang:

My love's bigger than a Cadillac

and he responded. His voice was flat next to hers. He couldn't give the words the emotional twist she could, but their voices synched, they meshed, they worked together perfectly.

When the musical break came, somebody threw Janis a tambourine so she could stay onstage, and she nabbed it out of the air. Somebody else kicked a bottle of Southern Comfort across the stage, and she stopped it with her foot, lifted it, downed a big slug. Holly was leaping into the air, doing splits, using every trick of an old rocker's repertoire, and miraculously he felt he could keep on doing so forever, could stretch the break out to infinity if he tried.

Janis beckoned widely toward the wings. "Come on out," she cried into the microphone. "Come on."

To a rolling avalanche of applause, Elvis strode onstage. He grabbed a guitar and strapped it on, taking a stance behind Holly. "You don't mind?" he mumbled.

Holly grinned.

They went into the third verse in unison. Standing between the other two, Holly felt alive and holy and—better than either alive or holy—*right*. They were his brother and sister. They were in tune; he could not have sworn which body was his.

Well, love is love and not fade away

Elvis was wearing another scarf. He whipped it off, mopped his brow, and went to the footlights to dangle it into the crowd. Then he retreated as fast as if he'd been bitten by a snake.

Holly saw Elvis talking to Janis, frantically waving an arm at the crowd beyond the footlights. She ignored him, shrugging off his words. Holly squinted, could not make out a thing in the gloom.

Curious, he duckwalked to the edge of the stage, peered beyond.

Half the audience was gone. As he watched, the twenty people farthest from the stage snapped out of existence. Then another twenty. And another.

The crowd noise continued undiminished, the clapping and whooping and whistling, but the audience was *gone* now—except for Blemings, who sat alone

in the exact center of the empty theater. He was smiling faintly at them, a smile that could have meant anything, and as Holly watched, he began softly, politely, to applaud.

Holly retreated backstage, pale, still playing automatically. Only Janis was singing now.

Not fade away

Holly glanced back at the musicians, saw first one, then another, cease to exist. Unreality was closing in on them. He stared into Elvis's face, and for an instant saw mirrored there the fear he felt.

Then Elvis threw back his head and laughed and was singing into his mike again. Holly gawked at him in disbelief.

But the *music* was right, and the *music* was good, and while all the rest—audience, applause, someplace to go when the show was over—was nice, it wasn't necessary. Holly glanced both ways and saw that he was not the only one to understand this. He rejoined the chorus.

Janis was squeezing the microphone tight, singing, when the last sideman blinked out. The only backup now came from Holly's guitar—Elvis had discarded his. She knew it was only a matter of minutes before the nothingness reached them, but it didn't really matter. *The music's all that matters*, she thought. *It's all that made any of it tolerable, anyway*. She sang.

Not fade away

Elvis snapped out. She and Holly kept on singing.

If anyone out there is listening, she thought. *If you can read my mind or some futuristic bullshit like that—I just want you to know that I'd do this again anytime. You want me, you got me.*

Holly disappeared. Janis realized that she had only seconds to go herself, and she put everything she had into the last repetition of the line. She wailed out her soul and a little bit more. *Let it echo after I'm gone*, she thought. *Let it hang on thin air*. And as the last fractional breath of music left her mouth, she felt something seize her, prepare to turn her off.

Not fade away

It had been a good session.

EVERY TIME YOU SAY I LOVE YOU by Charles L. Grant

Charles L. Grant was born in New Jersey in 1942 and has lived in that state all his life, except for four years at Trinity College in Connecticut and two years as an MP in Vietnam. Grant's first story was published in 1968, while he was working as a high school teacher. He turned to writing full-time in 1975 and has now published more than ten novels, over fifty short stories, and edited several anthologies of horror fiction, including the annual Shadows series from Doubleday. In 1981 two excellent collections of Grant's short fiction were published: A Glow of Candles (Berkley Books) and Tales from the Nightside (Arkham House). His most recent books include The Nestling (Pocket Books) and The Bloodwind (Popular Library), both novels, and a collection of four original novelettes, Nightmare Seasons (Doubleday).

Not surprisingly, Grant draws upon the familiar setting of northeastern suburban society for most of his writing—notably the western Connecticut town of Oxrun Station, a well-to-do bedroom community that you won't find on any map. At least, I hope not. Most of Grant's fiction is concerned with middle class suburban life: interpersonal conflicts between husbands and wives, parents and children; unfamiliar terrors in familiar surroundings. Quiet horror. "Every Time You Say I Love You" was written during a Nashville science fiction convention. Its setting and theme are typical of Grant's work. Its denouement ... Must have been an interesting convention.

The sunset bled from shades of blood to shades of dying. What few birds nested in the backyard elms were silent, leaving the nightvoice to tree frogs and passing cars and the frantic muffled beating of a moth against the kitchen's screen door. Ken watched until he thought he heard it screaming, turned away and reached for the bottle in the middle of the table. There was barely enough bourbon left to cover the bottom of the glass. He stared at it bleakly. The effort required to lift and pour, lift and swallow, outweighed by the effect of weary consideration.

A look to the passageway, long and dark and webbed with whispers, stretching through the house to the front door. A look to the white-faced, round-faced, faintly dusty clock over the stove. A look to his hands clutched and quivering at

his stomach.

It would work, he told himself sternly; it would work, it would work. Litany. Ritual. It would work, damnit, it would work. Litany. Ritual. Please let it work.

He had to be sure. He had to make himself feel sure. This time it would work, and he could come back inside when it was done, and Louise would be standing at the refrigerator, smiling at him, handing him a slice of bologna or a wedge of Boston cream pie while she licked her fingers with feigned and laughing guilt; he would come back inside and she would be sitting at the table with a glass of cream sherry in her hands and talking about excessive violence in hockey while in the same breath she threatened various of his clients with personal castration if they didn't pay up; he would come back inside and Louise would be there. There. Just ... there.

It would work. Please let it work.

The moth rested, was startled by the clicking approach of a nightbeetle, and vanished.

Ken was alone.

He shuddered as a way to rid himself of doubt. Took several deep breaths to keep the ice from his blood. Then he put his palms to his cheeks, his fingers shoved into the brown sweep of his hair. Slowly—a year, two, three—he lowered his elbows to the grey tabletop and rested. Five minutes later he began to weep over the empty, still warm glass.

It began as a fleck of soot behind his eyes. He blinked rapidly, hard, his throat constricted, his tongue pressed against the back of clenched teeth. (Lou; think of Lou) Another deep breath held, held, whistled silently between his lips. (Lou) (lou) The sound of someone stirring fitfully in troubled sleep. A choking. The blinking. An explosion of groans that scaled high into whimpering.

And he wept.

For ten minutes. For fifteen. His hands against his cheeks, the tears sweeping from his chin and into the glass.

And when he was done, shivering and sighing, he wiped his face quickly with a sleeve and cupped the glass in his hands. The tears filled the bottom. He rose unsteadily. He waited for balance. He hurried outside and down the porch steps. There was an oval garden on the left, but he ignored it in the dark; there was a gazebo moonlight prim on the right, but he refused to see it as the place where he loved her on summer nights like this. Instead, he moved as swiftly as he dared without running, the glass catching shards of light, the grass hissing wetly beneath his soles. The cherry tree was straight ahead. Lou's tree. Planted when they were first married, grown to strew pink, to shed white whenever spring let loose the wind.

Let it work. (lou)

And he tripped over a rake buried in the tall grass. He cried out enraged anguish and fell to his knees. The glass jumped from his hands, arced, mocked, fell and shattered. The tears vanished instantly and Ken Morgan screamed.

Just before midnight a hand feathered to his shoulder. He didn't feel it at first, then tried to shrug it off. It gripped, massaged, and he felt more than heard someone kneeling awkwardly beside him.

"Ken?"

He had been beyond thinking, feeling only the press of the night.

"Ken, a neighbor—that old guy over there—he called me. He thought you were being murdered or something."

He kept asking himself what the hell he had to do, what the hell it would take. Oh, Lou—god, I'm sorry. I had the tears and everything and I blew it. I blew it.

"Come on, Ken, it's getting chilly. Come on. You'll be all right. Come on, come on." Both shoulders taken now, strength pulling him to his feet. "Let's go inside, pal, there's nothing out here."

Hell, he thought wearily, I've blown it again. And once inside he stumbled to the sink and ran cold water from the tap, splashing it against his face until he was able to smile without it seeming rictus. The flesh tightened across his cheeks, his eyes no longer burned. He turned the faucet off and glanced up at the clock. Maybe I had the time wrong. He shrugged, turned, regarded his friend smiling.

Walter Trace was heavy, slipping into rotund, his hair blond, close to white and brushed straight back behind his ears. He wore a plaid shirt, creased trousers, slippers on his feet to indicate his haste. Abbott and Costello, Ken thought as he used a coarse paper towel to dry his face and hands; he knew that's what the rest of the office called them, not in derision but in good-natured awe of the way they complemented each other in the firm, and in the courtroom.

"You all right now?"

He nodded, tossed the wadded towel into the sink and took the chair opposite Trace. "Actually," he said, "I feel like an idiot."

"You should." Trace's voice was pitched high, almost whining. "Damnit, Ken!" He left hand pounded the table once. "Damnit, what the hell were you doing out there this time, sacrificing goats?"

Indignation was swallowed with difficulty behind a harsh rubbing of his face. Composure, he cautioned; composure, or you'll kill him. "I deserve that, I guess."

"Damn right."

“What I was doing ...” He sniffed, tugged idly at an earlobe. “Well, see, I read this story about—”

Trace groaned and reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

“—this guy who brought his lover back with tears. In a glass. He had to collect them, see. It was British, I think.” He shrugged. “Hell, I’ve tried everything else, you know?”

“No shit,” said Trace. His voice lowered. “Ken, I’m afraid I can’t cover for you anymore. And ... hell, I’m afraid.”

“Not of me!”

“No, for you. Lord, you’d think the way you’ve been acting you were the only man in the world whose wife ... nuts. Nuts, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Ken, there was no call for that.”

He held up a palm. “Don’t be. It’s okay. You’d be as crazy as I am if you didn’t care. As a matter of fact, I’d be worried if you weren’t. Caring, that is.”

A minute died in silence. Not quite awkward, not quite comfortable. Ken wished his friend would leave him. Now. He needed to be alone. He needed Lou, he needed her badly. But Trace only leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs under his belt. The cigarette lay burning acridly in a saucer between them.

“I’ve told everyone in the office you’d be in on Monday.”

Ken bridled, inhaled, hissed out control. “You’re determined, I’ll say that.”

“I’m your friend, damnit, for one thing. For another, we need you downtown.”

“I’m not indispensable.”

“No,” Trace agreed without flinching, “but we make more money when you’re there than when you’re not.” He grinned to ease the sting. “Now look, I want you to listen to me, Ken. When Louise died—”

“Was killed,” he corrected softly.

“—we were more than willing to give you plenty of room, to accommodate you, make sure you were okay. I mean, hell, you know what I mean. But, Ken, the time’s up. At least they think so, and they’re still the senior partners, not us, not yet.” He waited, but Ken only examined the clasp of his hands. “And I want you to stop all this other crap, too.”

“I love her.”

“A lot of men love their wives, Ken. But as far as I know, not one of them, not a single one of them has tried to bring them back from the dead.” He sliced at the air to forestall interruption. “Sure they find the loss hard to take, who wouldn’t? But, Ken, they accept it. Time passes and they accept it. They have to or it’s all over for them. Maybe the pain never really goes completely away, I don’t know. And to tell you the truth, I’d just as soon not. All I can say is, we’ve supported

you, we've backed you, and now you have to snap out of it. If you don't—good god, they'll be coming after you with nets, for god's sake."

Ken listened, heard, tried to decide what the right things were to say.

"Ken, please." Trace reached across the table and grabbed hold of his wrists. "Please." His face creased with concern. "You know," he said, releasing him and leaning back again, "I once thought this stuff you'd gotten into would do you some good. Help you work it all out somehow. It hasn't. I mean, I guess there are some guys who think about what you're doing, but that's all they do, Ken. Think about it. They don't ..."

Ken didn't need to follow the catalogue Trace spread before him. The cat, the bird, the doll, the chanting, the strips of oak bark, the weavings of dead grass—these were what Trace knew about, all Ken had told him. Trace hadn't heard, however, about the blood of a child, the seed of a bull, the head of a serpent, the hair of a corpse. He also didn't know about the prayers that had been uncovered, the symbolic rites, the midnight rituals, the dawn prostrations. If Trace had ever guessed at the truth, he might not be so eager to rush over whenever someone complained about the widower in the yard.

Maybe he was right. It *was* getting dangerous. The next time out, the old man might even call the police.

"—at nine o'clock." Trace stood. "If you're not there, Ken, I don't know what ..." He finished with a helpless, handwashing shrug.

Ken nodded his understanding, took the man's arm lightly and guided him down the passageway toward the front door. "No problem," he said. "And I'll be all right I guess all I needed was tonight." He grinned sheepishly. "You can count on me again, Walter. I'll be there Monday morning, first thing, with bells on."

Trace looked at him somewhat doubtfully, struggled before putting his hand to Ken's shoulder. "We've known each other for a long time, pal. We go a long way back. Not many men at forty can say that these days." Ken was afraid the man was going to cry. "I still have the number of that shrink, you know. It's no disgrace anymore. See him. Come back to us whole." He embraced Ken quickly, swallowed hard and left.

Ken waited at the threshold until the taillights were swallowed by the curve of the drive. Then he closed the door slowly and leaned his weight against it. No two ways about it, the man was right. He was calling too much unwanted attention to himself with all this mad behavior, and there was no profit left in blaming it on grief. If he continued to do so, that shrink might become mandatory and he would have a hell of a time breaking free again.

The trouble was, Lou had been a woman whose intense hold on her living had affected nearly everyone around her. Each of the seasons had vibrated with her

presence, each of her embraces more joyful than the last. She had created their twenty-year marriage out of laughter, their house out of love, had nudged his career along without him minding at all. He had had no idea how much he had used her simply for breathing until the afternoon that camper had jumped the curb downtown and pinned her against the wall. Pinned her. Like a butterfly. Arms/wings flailing, weaker, weaker, until red slipped from her mouth and took her life with it.

Even now he couldn't remember (didn't want to remember) the police talking with him, the man who had driven the vehicle weeping over his guilt. And the funeral—grey figures, black figures, a brilliant spring afternoon, no rain whatsoever, not a cloud in the sky. Children playing in yards as the cortege passed by. Dogs snapping at the wheels of the slow-moving hearse. A baseball game in a sandlot. Sun. Blue. Flowers. The cherry tree blossoming as if she hadn't left at all.

And she hadn't.

Grief had been immersion in freezing clear water. Once accustomed, it settled, flowered, became a part of him, became his reason. He had almost decided he was ready for work when he'd read about a woman who had robbed her child's grave because she wanted to perform some voodoo rites on the body. Ken sympathized. Empathized. Went to bed that night and dreamt of Lou and her lips and her arms and the smile that provided lanterns through every phase of night.

He told himself he was crazy, but he robbed her grave anyway. Opened the coffin. Took her home.

It was a hell of a big house, and, my god, he was lonely.

The magic began. Or the attempts to create it. And he wondered as he climbed the stairs if perhaps he didn't believe in it enough. If a part of his soul was still telling him he was crazy. Something was missing for sure, something vital in the process. Lou still wasn't the same as she had been when alive, and he couldn't figure out what the hell he was doing wrong.

He stood on the threshold of the bedroom and stared sorrowfully at their bed. Listened to the sounds of the house sighing down around him. Then he crossed the thick carpeting to sit on the mattress. Stretched, then began to take off his shoes.

"I'm sorry," he said. He hadn't turned on the light.

Socks. Shirt. Trousers. Scratching at his chest, his groin, over his thighs to the curve of his knees.

"Honest to god, I don't know what else to do."

He rubbed his hair vigorously, then combed it back with his fingers.

"Walter says I have to go back to work. There'll be hell to pay if I don't. And I

can't really argue with him. I can't keep this big house unless I start bringing in the checks again."

Naked now he stretched, yawned, rose and folded back the quilt and the crisp brown sheet. Patted the arrangement and went into the bathroom. Showered, used the toilet, brushed his teeth, brushed his hair. Back into the bedroom. The drawn shades refused the moonlight entry, but he knew his way blind to the far paneled wall.

"Hell, there's still lots of things left, though, you know. I just have to be more careful from now on, that's all. Some of the things you need are kind of hard to get. Like bodies. I don't know. The kid was easy, but I don't know ..."

He exercised for half an hour, lay on the carpet for five minutes to feel the warmth spread over his limbs.

"But I don't want you to think I'm going to give up. I'm not. Lord, there's still so much left to do!"

He rose agilely and pressed a stud that slid back the bookcase. A gleaming steel door with a combination lock. He worked it easily, not hurrying, not eager, gripped the double latch and yanked down, pulling the door toward him. He stiffened, then, as he had done every night for the past month, half expecting the circulation fans to have stopped working somehow. But everything was all right. The scent of lilac engulfed him.

"You know," he said, "every time you say I love you, I have to think of Walter. He always loved you. Always. He was jealous as hell when we were married. Even now I think he dreams about you." He laughed, almost a giggle. "I think that's why he never married. And, you know, I just thought of something. If he ... if I can find out just how much he still loves you, maybe ... just maybe he'll make a good prospect."

He fumbled for the light switch.

"Lou, can you hear me?" He listened to the fans, smelled the lilac, felt the warmth. "Maybe Walter will be the key. It would be damned ironic, but maybe he can bring you back. God knows we've tried everything else."

He hesitated. Waiting.

"I hope so," Lou said. Lovingly. Sweetly. Softly. Intensely. "I'm getting tired of this room."

He wanted to weep for her courage. Instead, he braved a smile and turned on the light.

"God, Louise, I love you!"

The grey, the red, the black-and-yellow, the scarlet, the purple ... the mass of sludge on the floor rippled and stirred.

"Oh, Ken," it whispered, "turn off the light and love me."

WYNTOURS by David G. Rowlands

David G. Rowlands first encountered the ghost stories of M.R. James during formative years at Eton College Choir School and has been a devotee ever since. Rowlands wrote his first ghost story at age 13 and sent it to August Derleth of Arkham House; as he did with so many fledgling writers, Derleth was kind enough to offer constructive criticisms. Born August 1, 1941, Rowlands, a biochemist by occupation, finds time to indulge his other interests: western films (he was associate editor of Wild West Stars), campanology (change-ringing on church bells), model railways, and, of course, ghost stories. Presently residing in Buckinghamshire, Rowlands' books include Spliced Doubles (on campanology), The Tralee and Dingle Railway, The Dingle Train (with W. McGrath), and the booklet of supernatural stories from which the following is reprinted, Eye Hath Not Seen ...

Rowlands began to write a series of stories dealing with the reminiscences of Father D. O'Connor, "to wile away boredom of college lectures when one had to be seen to write." Many of these appeared in student mimeographed publications during the period 1958-1963; a number subsequently appeared in The Holly Bough, a Christmas magazine published by the Cork Examiner. More recently, two Father O'Conner stories have appeared in Ghosts & Scholars, whose editor, Rosemary Pardoe, this past year published six of the stories as a booklet, Eye Hath Not Seen ..., handsomely illustrated by David Lloyd. "Wyntours" was written in 1962 as a tribute to the late John H. Ahern, whose model of the Madder Valley Railway was the inspiration of this story. "Wyntours" was submitted to Model Railway News at that time; however, the story was rejected, and Eye Hath Not Seen ... marks its first publication two decades later. Ironically, Model Railways (as it is now titled) has since accepted the story for its Christmas number. The Father O'Connor stories are very much in the classic English ghost story tradition. After twenty years, it's time they were received by a wider readership.

Our village pub (or one of them) was under new management. In the course of my daily ramble I had met Fr O'Connor doing his rounds and we paused to watch the hive of activity. One gang of workmen demolished appurtenances appropriate to the old, sagging walls and timbers, while another carried inside,

from a lorry, a horrifying procession of glass, chromium plate and imitation woodgrain plastic sheeting. Until the previous day a splendid old oak, encircled with a wooden seat, had stood patriarchally before the building and dropped its acorns on the grass ... now there was just the sawdust and a fast-setting new concrete plinth on which it was obviously intended to mount the replica stage-coach which stood to one side, garishly painted and decked with fairy lights. A new sign, ‘The Coachman’, leaning against one of the wheels, indicated the aptness of this ‘prop’.

We moved on sadly, remembering the many flagons we had quaffed beneath the old tree. I bent to turn over a metal sign propped against the gatepost. “Coach Parties Welcome”, it read. I dropped it like a hot potato.

Fr O’Connor turned to me. “You really ought to use your skill as a model railway enthusiast to preserve a memory of the old ‘Horseshoes’,” he remarked. “You build the engines, the wagons and the tracks; everything but the setting; you could make a splendid model of that old pub.”

I smiled wryly. “You have found me out, Father. I have a rooted dislike of recreating a scene in miniature.”

He looked sideways at me. “Aha”, he said slowly, “Something like ‘The Haunted Dolls’ House’, eh? I shall expect to hear all about it, mind.”

“Tonight then, Father,” I said, “If you insist; for I shall need to dig out some ‘visual aids’ as modern jargon has it.”

“Splendid,” he replied, “We can fit it in after dinner then, before my confirmation class.”

Our pipe and cigar were going well when I handed the old fellow the battered manila folder I had brought. He looked briefly over the contents.

“Articles from the *Model Railway News* from 1940 to 1954”, he commented. “The Madder Valley Railway”. He mused a moment or two, turning over the cuttings culled from that magazine. “Yes, yes—quite delightful, especially the buildings and scenery. Do continue.”

“The author and builder”, I said, “was a pioneer in both landscaping a model railway and creating an entirely imaginary system that embodied features from minor railways and places all over the world. Anything that took his eye was carefully photographed, measured and sketched, and—sooner or later—would fill a corner of his ‘Madder Valley’ location. As you can see from pictures of it, so excellent was his photography, so pleasing the subjects selected for modelling and so evocative his whimsical prose, that to my boy’s mind, the Madder Valley became almost a real place. Over the page there (I leaned forward and pointed) you’ll see a detailed map of the layout he created, with all the prominent

buildings marked. His text combines the instructive and fantastic. Look here, a description of an imaginary train ride through the valley, written in the style of Karl Baedeker ...”

The good priest read in silence for a few minutes, nodding gently and giving vent to the occasional chuckle. “I see what you mean,” he said, “A captivating style, and as for the pictures, well—it’s a cameo of rural English life where the clock has stopped fifty years ago.”

“From the first, then,” I continued, “Those articles captured my imagination. I pored over the map, studied the photos—matching them into the map, and with each other—and read and re-read the text until I came to know the delineated by-ways of the Madder Valley by heart. Why, I even based my own childish attempts at creating a model village and landscape (with my Hornby Trainset) upon this imaginary valley. In the course of two or three years, I actually dreamed on occasion, most pleasantly, that I was afoot in the Madder Valley, walking along the banks of the River Madder beside the ‘Moonraker’s Inn’ at Much Madder, or lingering (as boys will) about the boat yard, or even the village dump. (How many model railways since have run to a model rubbish dump, complete with tin cans and old hip baths?)

“Once or twice when travelling, or on holiday with my family, I actually recognised an original of one of the buildings I knew so well—perhaps a station in Oxfordshire, a clay works in Dorset, a rocky tunnel from Snowdonia—and this added to my pleasure and—oddly enough!—to the authenticity of the imagined setting.

“Gradually I became aware that my hitherto *occasional* dreams were becoming perceptibly more frequent Over the span of years when my interest in railways had to compete with school interests; cricket and the like; there had been times when I all but forgot it Now however, the dreams were forming into a sequence of events. My rambles along the river were taking me downstream, past the island with its ruined Doric temple, the boat yard, the ‘Moonrakers’ and toward the harbour, Madderporth.” (As I mentioned these landmarks the old priest was following them on the map with his finger).

“Although my waking interest was in the railway, this was merely a detail in the dreams. True, as I walked along, a train might rattle by, behind the Darjeeling-Himalaya locomotive or the little Manx tank engine, but my objective—in which I was conscious of a growing reluctance—was evidently to get to Madderporth. Eventually I abandoned the river and waited by the mill for a rattling, old open-topped omnibus that bumped and jolted me into the town. I alighted by the Harbour Offices (had I once seen them in Poole?) where the river ran out to sea. Ignoring the busy little port with railway sidings, ‘Tin Lizzie’

lorries, etc, I started back through the town to the riverside; passing the wine vaults, estate agent, ‘China Clipper’ pub and a warehouse; and came to what in the photos had been called ‘An old house by the river’, on the bank opposite a timber yard.

“The house was perched above the river on to which it backed. There was a small landing stage with room to tie up a skiff or small launch, and a flight of old stone steps up to the boathouse, coach-house and a walled garden. However I approached the house from the road via the wide front gate and weed-grown pathway. The name ‘Wyntours’ was only just discernible on the gate post; indeed the whole aspect was desolate and forlorn.

“As I walked up the drive I was aware that I did not want to enter; I was being impelled against my will. The front door swung open and I reluctantly went inside. It was dark and dank, smelling of mildew and old lobster pots. From the gloom a disembodied voice said, ‘Your room is upstairs’, and I found myself—even more reluctantly—climbing the uncarpeted stairs and crossing the landing to a back room. As I approached the door, I heard a dragging sound from within—a scuffing of the floor—and sounds of a sash window being raised or lowered. Terribly afraid now, I nonetheless opened the door and peeped in. The room was void of persons or furnishings, apart from a bare brass bedstead and a chipped washstand with ewer. However two lines—rather like bicycle tyre-marks—were made through the dust on the floor leading either to, or from, the window. This was dirty and fly-blown; the gauze curtains yellowed with age and full of dust. I parted them slightly and rubbed the grimy pane, looking out over the river from above the boathouse. Down below there were a number of people busy about something on the landing stage.

“I swung about, as at a sound in the room, convinced that I could hear breathing. I listened carefully, noting that my own respiration fell into the same rhythm. It seemed to come from an alcove, where I saw there was a linen press. Heart-in-mouth, I tiptoed across and suddenly pulled at the door. It was stuck fast; but now there came an ominous stirring from within and a horrible wave of fishy odour. The door creaked as if something were swelling against it ... and began to open. At that my last vestige of bravado faded and I backed across to the landing door and fumbled at the handle ... it was locked. Just as I could see a sort of whip-like antenna appearing round the cupboard, I mercifully woke up, panting and frightened.

“I had this dream twice more that week, the same in detail and sequence, but if anything serving to increase my helpless terror; so I told my mother something of the problem and was sent to a doctor. Being a practitioner of the old school, bless him, I got no pills but a fresh-air-and-exercise regime, and a milk nightcap,

which seemed to do the trick. In the circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that my enthusiasm for the Madder Valley decidedly waned.”

(I paused to select another cigar, snip off the end and light the fragrant leaf with a spill from the fire.)

“Our holiday that year took us to Cornwall, to the seaside village of ... well, let’s call it Poltrepenn. My parents, sisters and I walked from the station with our suitcases up a narrow winding street, and arrived—I can see you’ve anticipated me, Father!—yes, at a house that was all-too-familiar! I was horrified. The place was freshly painted, the garden weeded and the name on the gate said ‘The Moorings’, but there was no doubt it was the original ‘Wyntours’. Only a foolish dislike of making a spectacle of myself and of embarrassing my parents, prevented me from running away on the instant. My family noticed nothing ... then.

“A cheerful old lady opened the door and made us welcome with tea, but I knew what she was going to say (and so do you) ... my room was to be upstairs, at the back, overlooking the river. To avoid difficulties, and with legs of lead, I found myself going up behind the housekeeper. The room was freshly decorated—it still smelted of paint—and was as gay in the afternoon sun as were the poppies of its wallpaper. I swiftly ascertained that if there was a linen press in the alcove, it was well papered over. The window was open, with fresh gingham curtains on either side, and I was mildly surprised to see other Cornish houses opposite and not the Madderporth timber works.

“At any rate, I had resolved not to sleep in that room, and after the housekeeper had retired to bed in the room opposite, I would nightly creep downstairs to the sofa. Its sheer discomfort enabled me to get back to my room upstairs before she rose again, where I disordered my bed and re-made it badly, to give the impression I had slept there.

“So the days passed uneventfully. Some I spent with my family, others in fishing trips. I caught nothing, but enjoyed myself. With increasing immunity from the incursion of any events from my dreams, my curiosity returned. The Cornish are polite, but uncommunicative, and the best I could get from my boatman was an admission that the house had been called ‘Wyntours’ years ago, after a previous occupant. ‘The old Cap’en’, he called him; stories about whom his grandfather, and his before him, had passed on. Further enquiries in local pubs and on the Quay served to inform me only that the old ‘Cap’en’ had been a freebooter, fisherman and privateer in Napoleonic times, when the French were fought by day and traded with by night; though I clearly inferred that Captain Wyntour’s cargoes were human contraband.

“Then I thought of the library in the nearby town and caught the twice-daily

bus. I was lucky enough also to catch the genteel Lady Librarian at a moment of leisure. By chance, she was herself from Poltrepenn and, being educated, was less inhibited by prejudice toward strangers than the fishermen. She knew little of the history of the family, save that the last of the line—a James Wyntour—was known as a scholar and recluse, and had died around 1900. He had left substantial writings on Cornish archaeology (which were in the library) and a volume of memoirs. This last—a leather-bound tome like an account book—she produced from a locked cupboard. It was written in clear, copperplate longhand.

“There and then, in that prosaic library, I sat down to copy out the last entry, which seemed relevant to my quest; and here, Father, is that copy.” (So saying, I produced a folded wadge of paper from my pocket.)

“You read it, please,” said Fr O’Connor, leaning forward and reaching beneath his cassock for his tobacco pouch. So I smoothed out the folded sheets on my knee and began to read from James Wyntour’s memoir:

“Of the doom of the Wyntours it is now time to speak, shameful though it be; for I am the last of the line, and my time too, is at hand. It all began with my great-great-grandfather, Capt Royston Wyntour, master of the smack ‘Judith Lee’. He was a fisherman of some repute and import in the 1800s, but, like many others of his ilk, he was carrying out more profitable trade after dark, notably trafficking between the Channel Islands or Brest. From his private diary it is clear that in May of 1802 he was contacted at the ‘Running Tide’ in Poltrepenn and paid well to collect a nameless traveller from Brest, who was desirous of reaching these shores without attracting too much attention.

“Off the coast near Brest their longboat picked up the passenger, a repellently fat Cardinal who spoke French, with a huge iron-bound box that at once attracted attention. That the priest seemed on edge, and to be perpetually looking about him, was not perhaps to be wondered at in the circumstances, though later it took on other significance.

“Once aboard” (I continued reading), “it was a simple matter for my great-great-grandsire and his Mate to slit the unfortunate Cardinal’s throat. Such deeds were clearly, I regret, not uncommon to my kinsman at that period, and he was disconcerted more by the priest’s demeanour, than by the murder. ‘The Frog saw death coming, but he died laughing’, recorded the old seadog’s diary. ‘He muttered something in French’—that I have deciphered as probably ‘et sur votre heritieres’, which I take to be the origin of the story of our family curse. The Captain and Mate broke open the chest. As they suspected, it was full of richly-jewelled church furnishings and gold-embroidered vestments; candlesticks, plate, chalices, urns, reliquaries and the like. These they appropriated and thought it a rich jest to bundle the murdered man (after some necessary

mutilation) into the chest for delivery; sure that the illegality of the original operation would screen them from retribution. They divided the spoil into three sacks and the Mate took one to the crew as a price for silence; the other portions were to be his and the Captain's. My kinsman locked the door and sat at the cabin table, gloating over the loot. In one of the old gold reliquary boxes he found, not the expected fragments to tip on the floor in disgust, but a piece of gutta percha, or similar fabric, on which was crudely delineated a menacing beast; presumably heraldic and from Neptune's realm—for it resembled a crayfish more than anything else, and the artist had, despite his poor materials, somehow managed to convey a sense of menace, which the line 'Punito sum' did nothing to dispel.

"The Captain turned abruptly at a touch on his neck and saw (well I have now seen the thing myself and can understand his horror ...) in the corner of the cabin, big as a man, the grey crayfish-like creature crouching; one of its long hair-like feelers actually reaching out to the Captain's neck; the very creature of the parchment drawing. Despite its air of menace it did nothing ... then; but thereafter was always to be reckoned with.

"He became a haunted man, forever looking around—never seeing it, except when least expected, and more often at night when it had a pale phosphorescence. That was the last voyage for the Captain. Instead of delivering the chest and its gruesome contents, the Mate and he put it over the side. In the morning the Mate had vanished too—it being surmised that he had gone overboard. There was general unrest and further depletion among the crew; something uncanny was aboard, of that all were sure. The Captain retired to his riverside villa with his family. One night, six months later, he apparently cast himself from the upper window to the river below, striking the landing stage and dying there. The Coroner's court brought in a verdict of suicide. Of the religious booty taken by the Officers and crew there has been no subsequent trace; none of it turned up in Poltrepen. That the ship's log showed a detour off-course to Sark may have some bearing on the matter.

"The tale of the doom is handed down from father to son, and is often discounted and laughed at (as I did, heaven help me!) since the danger does not become apparent until about middle age, and has something therefore of a mythical quality. However, in my unhappy position I can affirm the reality of the successive deaths of the heirs, and of the creature's existence. It has been with me these ten weeks past; always behind me. I feel its touch, though I see it but rarely."

"So much for James Wyntour's history of his family curse", I said, folding up

the paper. "I caught the evening bus back to Poltrepen and tea, brooding on the tale and rereading my transcript. It was singularly unpleasant in its suggestion, for the creature that dogged the Wyntours tallied closely with that long, probing antenna I had seen from the cupboard in my dreams. I fervently cursed my wretched curiosity for reawakening all my forebodings.

"That night I was naturally more reluctant than usual to go upstairs to the back bedroom, and stopped down as late as my parents would allow. Finally I perforce retired, to sit on the bed until such a time as I could creep down again by torchlight. At long last I heard the housekeeper come upstairs and cross the landing; so down I went, with all possible stealth.

"Even now, it brings a cold sweat over me, Father, to think of my shocked realisation that I was *not* on the stairs to the hallway, but in an enclosed staircase leading to the boathouse! It was pitch dark but for the comforting triangle of light from my torch, and an all-pervading odour reminded me horribly of my dream. I knew I must be dreaming now, but I seemed to be wide awake. Could I be sleepwalking? A hard pinch disabused me of that notion. No, however I had started out, I was now awake and passing through a spring door to the rotting timbers of the deserted boathouse. Rats slid off into the water or fled at my approach, and I could see a battered skiff; a tangle of ropes and lobster pots to mark its one-time usage. All was silent now save for the lap, lap of the tidal river into the boathouse pound. I got my back to the nearest wall and shone my torch round about. It made a pool of light on the oily water of the pound that all but mesmerised me. The luminescence remained after I moved the torch away. Was it the moon? Impossible, the building was enclosed. The light broadened and, without further warning, the Wyntour's nemesis swarmed up on to the planking; a mass of phosphorescent grey-brown legs and whip-like feelers, all a-quiver.

"Wyntour's crayfish comparison went some way to categorising it, but ... Did you ever see in *Punch* some years ago, some extracts of "Unpublished Edward Lear" verses? No? Well, there was one called 'The Scroobious Pip', and Lear's drawing showed a typically bizarre creature, all legs and arms and feelers ... that sketch was the nearest thing to Wyntour's demon I can suggest.

"I screamed out loud as an antenna flexed toward me, and hurled my torch at the loathsome thing. It fell through it and into the pound. Fortunately for me the boathouse door was completely rotten and yielded to my frantic shoulder; otherwise I think I should have gone mad, there and then. I pitched on to the moonlit landing stage and hurled myself up the stone staircase to the stable yard. My frantic bangings aroused the entire house.

"I had enough sense to keep much of the story to myself; simply alleging (truthfully) that I had woken from sleep to find myself outside in my pyjamas.

Exploration upstairs showed that I had clearly fallen asleep on the bed while waiting for the housekeeper to retire, and that I had torn open the door behind the wallpaper. There were several thicknesses of paper overlaid, and the housekeeper had not even suspected its presence.

“When the others had returned to their interrupted sleep—the girls excited at the secret passage—I told my father enough of the real story that he took us home, two days earlier than planned. I was badly frightened and shaken, but the resilience of youth took care of that, and—fortunately—I dreamed no more of ‘Wyntours’ and of the occupant of the boathouse. Though after re-living all this, I may do so tonight! How much was dream and how much reality (for want of a better word), I did not and do not know. Nor do I particularly care to!” I laughed; a little hollowly, I fear.

“So you see Father, why I do not care for modelling buildings, and why I cannot see even a *cooked* lobster on a plate, without a shudder ...”

Father O’Connor nodded briefly and pinched up his lips in thought, as he rose to put on his outdoor coat. Absently he shrugged into it, then paused ...

“I have it,” he said, crossing to his overflowing bookshelves, where he poked about fussily for a moment or two. A triumphant “Aha” came as he rose and came back with a slim, green-covered book in his hands. He showed me the title.

“*Our Lady of the Turquoise Skirt,*” I read in an astonished voice.

He smiled briefly. “The author, Fr Dominic Shane, tells here the story of how the Spanish priests ‘Christianised’ the Aztec gods and myths, even while the conquerors were melting down Aztec gold, much of it as pagan idols and temple furnishings, for sending back to Spain. Now gold was not particularly precious to the Aztec peoples, but Fr Dominic relates ...” (he thumbed briskly through the pages) “how there were vengeful monsters attached to the temples to protect the furnishings; they were ... Ah, yes, minions of Tlaltechuhtli (however you pronounce it!) and ...” (here he read, following the line of print with his finger), “‘they could follow despoilers through all the appropriate elements’. Here now, is an artist’s redrawing of a temple mural showing these emissaries of vengeance”, and he indicated a page of sketches.

My stomach contracted for a moment, for—allowing for the Indian art-style—there, among other guises of bird and lizard, was a passable likeness of the crayfish thing. I sat down suddenly.

The good Father got me a brandy.

“You know”, he said, “It looks as if the Cardinal murdered by the old Captain might have been Spanish. I wonder where he was taking that stuff? Doubtless we shall never know, but it seemed from the memoir as though he, too, was well aware of being shadowed by the thing which protected the centuries-old golden

idols, even though their shape had been changed, purified in the fire as it were, and sanctified. I wonder ... how many predecessors that Cardinal had?"

After refilling my glass and pressing me to stay until his return, the old Priest was about to leave for his class. He paused with his hand on the door.

"Since that vengeful creature was still around in some form or other for you to perceive twenty years ago, and fifty years after the last Wyntour perished, it makes me wonder if those ornaments and furnishings are hidden in the boathouse, or at the bottom of the pound."

"Not me, it doesn't", I cried, ungrammatically.

He held up a hand. "Well, maybe we should go and see some day", he said.
So we did; but that's another story ...

THE DARK COUNTRY by Dennis Etchison

Twenty years after his first professional publication, Dennis Etchison is finally beginning to receive the acclaim he deserves as one of the premier writers of horror fiction. The high quality of his work has never been in question: the lack of recognition has been due in part to the fact that Etchison works primarily in the short story genre—a format not suited to the instant fame attainable through a best-selling novel—and in part to the elusive, introspective, ultimately negativistic nature of his writing, which is too subtle for some readers and too downbeat for others.

Born March 30, 1943 in Stockton, California, Dennis Etchison presently lives in Los Angeles. Films are a major interest (a characteristic that seems common to horror writers), and Etchison has written a number of as-yet unproduced screenplays—including The Fox and the Forest from a Ray Bradbury story, The Mist from Stephen King's novella, The Ogre, for Dino de Laurentis, and They based on Etchison's own story, "The Late Shift." A horror novel, The Shudder, and a collection of short stories await publication. In 1980 Etchison's novelization of the John Carpenter film, The Fog, was published, and in 1981 his novelization of Carpenter's Halloween II appeared—under Etchison's pseudonym, Jack Martin.

Writers find inspiration where they may. "The Dark Country," of all unlikely things, is one of those how-I-spent-my-summer-vacation pieces. It was first published in the outstanding British magazine, Fantasy Tales, and later in the same year was reprinted in the new U.S. magazine, Fantasy Book.

Martin sat by the pool, the wind drying his hair.

A fleshy, airborne spider appeared on the edge of the book which he had been reading there. From this angle it cast a long, pointed needle across the yellowing page. The sun was hot and clean; it went straight for his nose. Overweight American children practiced their volleyball on the bird of paradise plants. Weathered rattan furniture gathered dust beyond the peeling diving board.

Traffic passed on the road. Trucks, campers, bikes.

The pool that would not be scraped till summer. The wooden chairs that had been ordered up from the States. Banana leaves. Olive trees. A tennis court that might be done next year. A single color TV antenna above the palms. By the

slanted cement patio heliotrope daisies, speckled climbing vines. The morning a net of light on the water. Boats fishing in Todos Santos Bay.

A smell like shrimps Veracruz blowing off the silvered waves.

And a strangely familiar island, like a hazy floating giant, where the humpback whales play. Yesterday in Ensenada, the car horns talking and a crab taco in his hand, he had wanted to buy a pair of huaraches and a Mexican shirt. The best tequila in the world for three-and-a-half a liter. Noche Bueno beer, foil labels that always peel before you can read them. Delicados con Filtros cigarettes.

Bottles of agua mineral. Tehuacan con gas. *No retornable*.

He smiled as he thought of churros at the Blow Hole, the maid who even washed his dishes, the Tivoli Night Club with Reno cocktail napkins, mescal flavored with worm, eggs fresh from the nest, chorizo grease in the pan, bar girls with rhinestone-studded Aztec headbands, psychoactive liqueurs, seagulls like the tops of valentines, grilled corvina with lemon, the endless plumes of surf ...

It was time for a beer run to the bottling factory in town.

“*Buenos dias!*”

Martin looked up, startled. He was blinded by the light. He fumbled his dark glasses down and moved his head. A man and a woman stood over his chair. The sun was at their backs.

“*Americano?*”

“Yes,” said Martin. He shielded his forehead and tried to see their faces. Their features were blacked in by the glare that spilled around their heads.

“I told you he was an American,” said the woman. “Are you studying?”

“What?”

Martin closed the book self-consciously. It was a paperback edition of *In The Penal Colony*, the only book he had been able to borrow from any of the neighboring cabins. Possibly it was the only book in Quintas Papagayo. For some reason the thought depressed him profoundly, but he had brought it poolside anyway. It seemed the right thing to do. He could not escape the feeling that he ought to be doing something more than nursing a tan. And the magazines from town were all in Spanish.

He slipped his sketchbook on top of Kafka and opened it awkwardly.

“I’m supposed to be working,” he said. “On my drawings. You know how it is.” They didn’t, probably, but he went on. “It’s difficult to get anything done down here.”

“He’s an artist!” said the woman.

“My wife thought you were an American student on vacation,” said the man.

“Our son is a student, you see,” said the woman. Martin didn’t, but nodded

sympathetically. She stepped aside to sit on the arm of another deck chair under the corrugated green fiberglass siding. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and thigh-length shorts. "He was studying for his Master's Degree in Political Science at UCLA, but now he's decided not to finish. I tried to tell him he should at least get his teaching credential, but—"

"Our name's Winslow," said the man, extending a muscular hand. "Mr. and Mrs. Winslow."

"Jack Martin."

"It was the books," said Mr. Winslow. "Our boy always has books with him, even on visits." He chuckled and shook his head.

Martin nodded.

"You should see his apartment," said Mrs. Winslow. "So many." She threw up her hands, as if describing the symptoms of a hopeless affliction.

There was an embarrassing lull. Martin looked to his feet. He flexed his toes. The right ones were stiff. For something further to do, he uncapped a Pilot Fineliner pen and touched it idly to the paper. Without realizing it, he smiled. This trip must be doing me more good than I'd hoped, he thought. I haven't been near a college classroom in fifteen years.

A wave rushed toward the rocks at the other side of the cabins.

"Staying long?" asked the man, glancing around nervously. He was wearing Bermuda shorts over legs so white they were almost phosphorescent.

"I'm not sure," said Martin.

"May I take a peek at your artwork?" asked the woman.

He shrugged and smiled.

She lifted the sketchbook from his lap with infinite delicacy, as the man began talking again.

He explained that they owned their own motor home, which was now parked on the Point, at the end of the rock beach, above the breakwater. Weekend auto insurance cost them \$13.70 in Tijuana. They came down whenever they got the chance. They were both retired, but there were other things to consider—just what, he did not say. But it was not the same as it used to be. He frowned at the moss growing in the bottom of the pool, at the baby weeds poking up through the sand in the canister ashtrays, at the separating layers of the sawed-off diving board.

Martin could see more questions about to surface behind the man's tired eyes. He cleared his throat and squirmed in his chair, feeling the sweat from his arms soaking into the unsealed wood. Mr. Winslow was right, of course. Things were not now as they once were. But he did not relish being reminded of it, not now, not here.

A small figure in white darted into his field of vision, near the edge of the first cabin. It was walking quickly, perhaps in this direction.

"There's my maid," he said, leaning forward. "She must be finished now." He unstuck his legs from the chaise longue.

"She has keys?" said the man.

"I suppose so. Yes, I'm sure she does. Well—"

"Does she always remember to lock up?"

He studied the man's face, but a lifetime of apprehensions were recorded there, too many for Martin to isolate one and read it accurately.

"I'll remind her," he said, rising.

He picked up his shirt, took a step toward Mrs. Winslow and stood shifting his weight.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the maid put a hand to the side of her face.

Mrs. Winslow closed the pad, smoothed the cover and handed it back. "Thank you," she said oddly.

Martin took it and offered his hand. He realized at once that his skin had become uncomfortably moist, but Mr. Winslow gripped it firmly and held it. He confronted Martin soberly, as if about to impart a bit of fatherly advice.

"They say he comes down out of the hills," said Winslow, his eyes unblinking. Martin half-turned to the low, tan range that lay beyond the other side of the highway. When he turned back, the man's eyes were waiting. "He's been doing it for years. It's something of a legend around here. They can't seem to catch him. We never took it seriously, until now."

"Is that right?"

"Why, last night, while we were asleep, he stole an envelope of traveler's checks and a whole carton of cigarettes from behind our heads. Can you beat that? Right inside the camper! Of course we never bothered to lock up. Why should we? Everyone's very decent around here. We've never had any trouble ourselves. Until this trip. It's hard to believe."

"Yes, it is." Martin attempted to pull back as a tingling began in his stomach. But the man continued to pump his hand, almost desperately, Martin thought.

"The best advice I can give you, young man, is to lock your doors at night. From now on. You never know."

"Thanks, I will."

"He comes out after the sun goes down." He would not let go of Martin's hand. "I figure he must hit the beach three-four in the morning, when all the lights are out. Slips right in. No one notices. And then it's too late."

Martin pretended to struggle with the books so that he could drop his hand.

"Well, I hope you're able to enjoy the rest of your vacation." He eyed the maid.
"Now I'd better—"

"We're warning everybody along the beach," said Winslow.

"Maybe you should report it."

"That don't do no good. They listen to your story, but there's nothing they can do."

"Good luck to you, then," said Martin.

"Thank you again," said the woman peculiarly. "And don't forget. You lock your door tonight!"

"I will," said Martin, hurrying away. I won't, that is. Will, won't, what did it matter? He side-stepped the dazzling flowers of an ice plant and ascended the cracked steps of the pool enclosure. He crossed the paved drive and slowed.

The maid had passed the last of the beachfront houses and was about to intersect his path. He waited for her to greet him as she always did. I should at least pretend to talk to her, he thought, in case the Winslows are still watching. He felt their eyes, or someone's, close at his back.

"*Buenos días,*" he said cheerfully.

She did not return the greeting. She did not look up. She wagged her head and trotted past, clutching her uniform at the neck.

He paused and stared after her. He wondered in passing about her downcast eyes, and about the silent doorways of the other cabins, though it was already past ten o'clock. And then he noticed the scent of ozone that now laced the air, though no thunderhead was visible yet on the horizon, only a gathering fog far down the coastline, wisps of it beginning to striate the wide, pale sky above the sagging telephone poles. And he wondered about the unsteadiness in Mrs. Winslow's voice as she had handed back the sketchbook. It was not until he was back at the beach that he remembered: the pages he had shown her were blank. There were no sketches at all yet in the pad, only the tiny flowing blot he had made with his pen on the first sheet while they talked, like a miniature misshapen head or something else, something else, stark and unreadable on the crisp white sulfite paper.

He was relieved to see that the private beach had finally come alive with its usual quota of sunbathers. Many of them had probably arisen early, shortly after he left for the quiet of the pool, and immediately swarmed to the surf with no thought of TV or the morning paper, habits they had left checked at the border sixty miles from here. A scattered few lagged back, propped out on their patios, sipping coffee and keeping an eye on the children who were bounding through the spume. The cries of the children and of the gulls cut sharply through the waves which, disappointingly, were beginning to sound to Martin like nothing so

much as an enormous screenful of ball bearings.

There was the retired rent-a-cop on holiday with his girl friend, stretched out on a towel and intent on his leg exercises. There was the middle-aged divorcee from two doors down, bent over the tidepools, hunting for moonstones among jealous clusters of aquamarine anemones. And there was Will, making time with the blonde in the blue tank top. He seemed to be explaining to her some sort of diagram in the slicked sand between the polished stones. Martin toed into his worn rubber sandals and went down to join them.

"Want to go to a party?" Will said to him as he came up.

"When?"

"Whenever," said the blonde in the blue top. She tried to locate Martin's face, gave up and gazed back in the general direction of the southern bungalows.

There a party was still in progress, as it had been since last Wednesday, when Will and Martin had arrived. The other party, the one on the north side, had apparently been suspended for a few hours, though just now as Martin watched a penny rocket streaked into the sky from the bathroom window, leaving an almost invisible trail of powder-blue smoke in the air above the water. The skyrocket exploded with a faint report like a distant rifle and began spiraling back to earth. Martin heard hoarse laughter and the sudden cranking-up of stereo speakers inside the sliding doors. So the party there was also nearly in full swing again, or had never let up. Perhaps it was all one big party, with his cabin sandwiched like a Christian Science reading room between two pirate radio stations. He remembered the occasional half-dressed teenager staggering around the firepit and across his porch last night, grunting about more beer and did he know where those nurses were staying? Martin had sat outside till he fell asleep, seeing them piss their kidneys out on the steaming stones by the footpath.

"Bummer," said the girl seriously. Martin noticed that she was lugging around an empty twelve-ounce bottle. She upended it and a few slippery drops hit the rocks. "You guys wouldn't know where the Dos Equis's stashed, wouldjou?"

"*No es problema*, my dear," said Will, steering her toward the patio.

Martin followed. Halfway there the girl wobbled around and hurled the bottle as high as she could away from the shoreline. Unfortunately, her aim was not very good. Martin had to duck. He heard it whistle end-over-end over his head and shatter on the flat rocks. Will caught her under the arms and staggered her inside. Next door, a Paul Simon song was playing on the tape deck.

By the time Martin got there she was on her way out, cradling a bottle of Bohemia. Again she tried to find his eyes, gave up and began picking her way across the rocks.

"Take it slow," yelled Will. "Hey, sure you don't want to lie down for a

while?"

Martin grinned at him and walked past into the high-beamed living room. The fireplace was not lighted, nor was the wall heater, but a faint but unmistakable odor of gas lingered in the corners.

"We better stock up on Dos Equis from now on," said Will.

"Is that her favorite?"

"She doesn't care. But we shelled out a deposit on the case of Bohemia. Dos Equis is no return."

Martin stood staring out at the island in the bay. The fishing boats were moving closer to shore. Now he could barely make out the details of the nearest one. He squinted. It wasn't a fishing boat at all, he realized. It was much larger than he had imagined, some kind of oil tanker, perhaps. "Guess what, Will? We're going to have to start locking the doors."

"Why? Afraid the *putas* are gonna OD on Spanish fly and jump our bones in the middle of the night?"

"You wish," said Martin. He sniffed around the heater, then followed the scent to the kitchen and the stove. "The gas pilots," he said. "It's the draft. You—we're—always going in and out. The big door's open all the time."

"Got a match, man?" Will took out a bent cigarette, straightened it and crumpled the pack. The table was littered with empty packs of cheap Mexican cigarettes, Negritos and Faros mostly. Martin wondered how his friend could smoke such garbage. He took out his Zippo. Will struck it with an exaggerated shaking of his hands, but it was out of fluid. He stooped over the gas stove and winked at Martin. He turned the knob. The burner lit. He inhaled, coughed and reached for the tequila. He poured himself a tall one mixed with grapefruit juice. "Mmm. Good for the throat, but it still burns a little."

"Your system runs on alcohol, Willy. You know that, don't you?"

"Don't all machines?"

"Myself, I could go for some eggs right now. How about you? What've we got left?" Martin went to the sink. It was full of floating dishes. "Hey, what the hell is it with the maid? We did remember to leave her a tip yesterday. Didn't we?"

"One of us must have."

That was it, then. That was why she had skipped them, and then snubbed him this morning. That had to be it. Didn't it?

The tape deck next door was now blaring a golden oldie by Steely Dan. Martin slid the glass door closed. Then he snagged his trousers from the back of a chair and put them on over his trunks. Started to put them on. They did not feel right. He patted his back pocket.

Will slid the door back open halfway. "You're serious, aren't you? Look at it

this way. Leave it like this and the gas'll just blow on outside. Relax, man. That's what you came down here for, isn't it? After what happened, you need ...”

Martin checked the chair. On the table were a deck of playing cards from a Mission Bay savings and loan, the backs of which were imprinted with instructions about conserving energy, a Mexican wrestling magazine with a cover picture of the masked hero, El Santo, in the ring against a hooded character in red jumpsuit and horns, and an old mineral water bottle full of cigarette butts. On the floor, lying deflated between the table legs, was his wallet.

“There's another reason, I'm afraid.” Martin twisted open the empty wallet and showed it to his friend.

“Who in the hell ...?”

“Well, it certainly wasn't the maid. Look at this place.” Outside, a small local boy came trudging through the patios. He was carrying a leather case half as big as he was. He hesitated at the cabin on the south side, as three teenaged American boys, their hair layered identically and parted in the middle, called their girls out into the sun. “It must have happened during the night.”

“Christ!” said Will. He slapped the tabletop. He reached for his own wallet. It was intact. “There. I was over there partying all night, remember? They must've passed by every place where anybody was still up.”

The small boy opened his case and the American girls began poring excitedly over a display of Indian jewelry, rings and belt buckles and necklaces of bright tooled silver and turquoise. From a distance, an old man watched the boy and waited, nodding encouragement.

“You should have gone with me,” said Will. “I told you. Well, don't you worry, Jack. I've got plenty here for both of us.”

“No, man. I can wire my agent or—”

“Look,” said Will, “I can even kite a check if I have to, to cover the rental till we get back. They'll go for it. I've been coming here since I was a kid.”

I've got to get away from here, thought Martin. No, that isn't right. Where else is there to go? I've come this far already just to get away. It's hopeless. It always was. You can run, he told himself, but you can't hide. Why didn't I realize that?

“Here,” said Will. “Here's twenty for now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don't worry about it. I'd better go see if the nurses got hit, too. Saw a bunch of people in a huddle down the beach a while ago.” He drained his glass. “Then I'll make another beer run. The hell with it. We're gonna party tonight, God damn it! You going by the office, Jack?”

“Sure.”

“Then you might as well report it to the old lady. I think she’s got a son or a nephew in the federales. Maybe they can do something about it.”

“Maybe,” said Martin, cracking open a beer. He could have told Will that it wouldn’t do any good. He stopped in at the office anyway. It didn’t.

He wandered on up the highway to Enrique’s Cafe. On the way he passed a squashed black cat, the empty skin of it in among the plants, the blood-red flowers and spotted adder’s tongues and succulents by the roadside. The huevos rancheros were runny but good. When he got back, Will’s four-wheel drive was still parked under the carport. He took the keys and made the beer run into town himself, police cars honking him out of the way to make left turns from right-hand lanes, zigzagging across the busy intersections of the city to avoid potholes. He bought a case of Dos Equis and, for forty cents more, a liter of soft, hot tortillas. As the afternoon wore on he found himself munching them, rolled with butter and later plain, even though he wasn’t really hungry.

That evening he sat alone on a bench by the rocks, hearing but not listening to a Beatles song (“Treat Me Like You Did the Night Before”), the smoke from his Delicado wafting on the breeze, blending with wood smoke from the chimneys and rising slowly to leave a smear like the Milky Way across the Pleiades. It’s time for me to leave this place, he thought. Not to run away, no, not this time; but to go back. And face the rest of it, my life, no matter how terrible things may have turned back home since I left.

Not Will, though; he should stay awhile longer if he likes. True, it was my idea; he only took the time off at my suggestion, setting it all up to make me comfortable; he knew I couldn’t take any more last week, the way things were up there. He’s my friend. Still, he was probably waiting for just such an excuse in order to get away himself.

So I’ll call or wire the agency for a plane ticket, give them a cock-and-bull story about losing everything—the truth, in other words. It was the truth, wasn’t it? I’ll say the trip was part of the assignment. I had to come down here to work on some new sketches for the book, to follow a lead about headstone rubbings in, let’s see, Guanajuato. Only I never made it that far. I stopped off for some local color. Charge it against my royalty statement ... I’ll talk to them tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow.

Meanwhile, there’s still tonight ...

But I should tell Will first.

He resumed walking. There was a fire on the breakwater by the Point. He went toward it. Will would be in one of the cabins, partying with a vengeance. Martin glanced in one window. A slide show was in progress, with shots that

looked like the pockmarked surface of another planet taken from space. He pressed closer and saw that these pictures were really close-ups of the faces of newborn seals or sea lions. Not that one, he thought, and moved on.

One of the parties he came to was in the big cabin two doors north of his own. That one was being rented, he remembered, by the producer of a show in the late seventies called *Starship Disco*. Martin had never seen it.

An Elvis Costello tape shook the walls. A young card hustler held forth around the living room table. A warm beer was pushed into Martin's hand by a girl. He popped the beer open and raised it, feeling his body stir as he considered her. Why not? But she could be my daughter, technically, he thought, couldn't she? Then: what a disgusting point of view. Then: what am I doing to myself? Then it was too late; she was gone.

Will was not in the back rooms. The shelf in the hallway held three toppling books. Well well, he thought, there are readers down here, after all. Then he examined them—*By Love Possessed* by Cozzens, *Invitation to Tea* by Monica Lang (The People's Book Club, Chicago, 1952), *The Foundling* by Francis Cardinal Spellman. They were covered with years of dust.

He ducked into the bathroom and shut the door, seeing the mirror and razor blade lying next to the sink, the roll of randomly perforated crepe paper toilet tissue. There was a knock on the door. He excused himself and went out, and found Will in the kitchen.

“*Dos cervezas, Juan!*” Will was shouting. “Whoa. I feel more like I do now than when I got here!” With some prodding, he grabbed two cold ones and followed Martin outside, rubbing his eyes.

He seemed relieved to sit down.

“So,” began Martin. “What did you find out? Did anyone else get popped last night?”

“Plenty! One, the nurses. Two, the bitch from San Diego. Three, the—where is it now? Ojai. Those people. The ...” He ran out of fingers. “Let's see. Anyway, there's plenty, let me tell you.”

The ships were now even nearer the shore. Martin saw their black hulls closing in over the waves.

“I was thinking,” he said. “Maybe it's time to go. What would you say to that, man?”

“Nobody's running scared. That's not the way to play it. You should hear 'em talk. They'll get his ass next time, whoever he is. Believe it. The kids, they didn't get hit. But three of those other guys are rangers. Plus there's the cop. See the one in there with the hat? He says he's gonna lay a trap, cut the lights about three o'clock, everybody gets quiet, then bam! You better believe it. They're

mad as hell.”

“But why—”

“It’s the dock strike. It happens every year when there’s a layoff. The locals get hungry. They swoop down out of the hills like bats.”

Just then a flaming object shot straight through the open front door and fizzled out over the water. There was a hearty “All r-r-right!” from a shadow on the porch, and then the patio was filled with pogoing bodies and clapping hands. The night blossomed with matches and fireworks, 1000-foot skyrockets, bottle rockets and volleys of Mexican cherry bombs, as the party moved outside and chose up sides for a firecracker war. Soon Martin could no longer hear himself think. He waited it out. Will was laughing.

Martin scanned the beach beneath the screaming lights. And noticed something nearby that did not belong. It was probably a weird configuration of kelp, but ... he got up and investigated.

It was only this: a child’s broken doll, wedged half-under the stones. What had he supposed it was? It had been washed in on the tide, or deliberately dismembered and its parts strewn at the waterline, he could not tell which. In the flickering explosions, its rusty eye sockets appeared to be streaked with tears.

A minute after it had begun, the firecracker war was over. They sat apart from the cheering and breaking bottles, watching the last shot of a Roman candle sizzle below the surface of the water like a green torpedo. There was scattered applause, and then a cry went up from another party house down the beach as a new round of fireworks was launched there. Feet slapped the sand, dodging rocks.

“Do you really believe that?”

“What?”

“About someone coming down from the hills,” said Martin. *Like bats.* He shuddered.

“Watch this,” said Will. He took his bottle and threw it into the air, snapping it so it flew directly at a palm tree thirty feet away. It smashed into the trunk at the ragged trim line.

Instantly the treetop began to tremble. There was a high rustling and a shaking and a scurrying. And a rattling of tiny claws. A jagged frond dropped spearlike to the beach.

“See that? It’s rats. The trees around here are full of ‘em. You see how bushy it is on top? It never gets trimmed up there. Those rats are born, live and die in the trees. They never touch down.”

“But how? I mean, what do they eat if—?”

“Dates. Those are palm trees, remember? And each other, probably. You’ve

never seen a dead one on the ground, have you?”

Martin admitted he hadn’t.

“Not that way with the bats, though. They have to come out at night. Maybe they even hit the rats. I never saw that. But they have mouths to feed, don’t they? There’s nothing much to eat up in the hills. It must be the same with the peasants. They have families. Wouldn’t you?”

“I hate to say this. But. You did lock up, didn’t you?”

Will laughed dryly. “Come on. I’ve got something for you. I think it’s time you met the nurses.”

Martin made a quick sidetrip to check the doors at their place, and they went on. They covered the length of the beach before Will found the porch he was looking for. Martin reached out to steady his friend, and almost fell himself. He was getting high. It was easy.

As they let themselves in, the beach glimmered at their backs with crushed abalone shells and scuttling hermit crabs. Beyond the oil tankers, the uncertain outline of the island loomed in the bay. It was called Dead Man’s Island, Will told him.

He woke with the sensation that his head was cracking open. Music or something like it in the other room, throbbing through the thin walls like the pounding of surf. Voices. An argument of some kind. He brushed at the cobwebs. He had been lost in a nightmare of domination and forced acquiescence before people who meant to do him harm. It returned to him in fragments. What did it mean? He shook it off and rolled out of bed.

There was the floor he had pressed with his hand last night to stop the room from spinning. There was the nurse, tangled in the sheets next to him. He guessed she was the nurse. He couldn’t see her face.

He went into the bathroom. He took a long draught of water from the faucet before he came out. He raised his head and the room spun again. The light from the window hurt his eyes—actual physical pain. He couldn’t find his sock. He tottered into the other room.

A young man with blown-dry hair was playing the tape deck too loudly. The sound vibrated the bright air, which seemed thin and brittle, hammering it like beaten silver. There was the girl in the blue tank top, still seated next to the smoldering fireplace. An empty bottle of Damiana Liqueur was balanced against her thigh. Her eyes were closed and her face was stony. He wondered if she had slept that way, propped upright all night. On the table were several Parker Brothers-type games from stateside: *Gambler*, *Creature Features*, *The Game of Life*. A deck of Gaiety Brand nudie cards, with a picture on the box of a puppy pulling a bikini top out of a purse. Someone had been playing solitaire. Martin

couldn't remember.

There was a commotion outside.

"What's that?" he said, shielding his eyes.

"Talking Heads," said the young man. He showed Martin the tape box.
"They're pretty good. That lead guitar line is hard to play. It's so repetitious."

"No, I mean ..."

Martin scratched and went into the kitchen. It was unoccupied, except for a cricket chirping somewhere behind the refrigerator. Breakfast was in process; eggs were being scrambled in a blender the nurses had brought with them from home. Martin protected his eyes again and looked outside.

There was Will. And there were three or four tan beach boys from the other party. And the cop. He wasn't doing his leg exercises this morning. They were having an argument.

Martin stumbled out.

"But you can't do that," one of them was saying.

"Stay cool, okay, motherfuck? You want the whole beach to know?"

"You think they don't already?"

"The hell they do! We drug him over out of the way. No one'll—"

"No one but the maids!"

"That's what I'm *saying*. You guys are a bunch of jackoffs. Jesus Christ! I'm about *this* close to kicking your ass right now, do you know that?"

"All right, all right!" said Will. "That kind of talk's just digging us in deeper. Now let's run through the facts. One—"

Martin came up. They shot looks at each other that both startled him and made him unreasonably afraid for their safety as well as his own. They stopped talking, their eyes wild, as if they had gobbled a jar of Mexican amphetamines.

Will took him aside.

"We've got to do something!" said the one with the souvenir hat. "What're you—?"

"Hold on," said Will. "We're all in this together, like it or—"

"I'm not the one who—"

"—Like it or not. Now just try to keep a tight asshole another minute, will you, while I talk to my friend Jack? It's his neck, too."

They started back up the beach. Will propelled him ahead of the others, as to a rendezvous of great urgency.

"They got him," said Will.

"Who?"

"The thief, whoever he was. Poor bastard. Two guys from next door cornered him outside our place. Sometime around dawn, the way I get it. Apparently he

fell on the rocks. He's dead. They found me here a little while ago. Now—”

“What?”

“Now there's no use shitting bricks. It's done. What we have to do is think of a way to put ourselves in the clear—fast. We're the strangers here.”

“We can make it look like an accident,” said the one in the hat. “Those rocks are—”

“Accident, hell,” said the security cop. “It was self-defense, breaking and entering. We caught him and blew him away. No court in—”

“This isn't the USA, you dumb shit. You know what greaser jails are like? They hate our guts. All they want's our money. This buddy of mine, he got ...”

And so it went till they reached the porch, the surrounding beach littered with the casings of burnt-out rockets, vomit drying on the rocks, broken clam shells bleaching between the rocks, the rocks like skulls. And here blood, vivid beyond belief even on the bricks of the patio, great splotches and gouts of it, like gold coins burnished in the sun, a trail that led them in the unforgiving light of day to the barbecue pit and the pile of kindling stacked in the charcoal shade.

Martin knelt and tore at the logs.

And there.

The body was hidden inside a burlap sack. It was the body of the boy who had come by yesterday, the boy who had wanted to sell his jewelry.

He felt his stomach convulse. The small face was scraped raw, the long eyelashes caked and flaking, the dark skin driven from two of the ribs to show white muscle and bone. A great fear overtook Martin, like wings settling upon him, blocking out the sun. He folded under them momentarily and dry-heaved in the ashes.

Will was pacing the narrow patio like a prisoner in a cell, legs pumping out and back over the cracking cement, pivoting faster and faster at the edges until he was practically spinning, generating a hopeless rage that would not be denied but could not be released. His hands were shaking violently, and his arms and shoulders and body. He looked around with slitted eyes, chin out, lips drawn in, jaws grinding stone. From far down the beach by the Point an elderly man came walking, hesitating at each house and searching each lot. He was carrying a leather case.

Will said, “You kicked him to death, didn't you? You stomped this child until he was dead.” Then, his voice a hiss, he began to curse them between his teeth with an unspeakable power and vileness. The one in the hat tried to break in. He started shouting.

“It was dark! He could've been anyone! What was he doing creepin' around here? He could've been—”

But Will was upon him, his arms corded, his fingers going for the throat. The others closed in. People on the beach were turning to stare. Martin saw it all as if in slow motion: himself rising at last to his full height, leaping into it a split-second before the others could grab hold, as he fell on their arms to stop the thumbs from Will's eyes, to break Will's hands from the other's throat. Everything stopped. Martin stepped between them as the young one fell back to the flagstone wall. Martin raised his right hand, flattened and angled it like a knife. With his left he cupped the back of the young man's neck, holding it almost tenderly. The young man's eyes were almost kind. They were eyes Martin had seen all his life, in gas stations and pizza joints and Greyhound bus depots the years over, and they were a law unto themselves. He brought his right hand down sharp and hard across the face, again, again, three times, like pistol shots. The tan went white, then red where he had slapped it. For a moment nobody said anything. The old man kept coming.

They passed motorcycle cops, overheated VW's, Jeeps, Chevy Luvs, Ford Couriers with camper shells, off-road vehicles with heavy-duty shocks and, a mile outside of town, a half-acre of pastel gravestones by the main road. Martin fit as best he could among the plastic water jugs, sleeping bags and Instamatic cameras in the backseat. The boys from next door were piled in with him, the one in the hat in front and Will at the controls of the four-wheel drive.

The twenty-mile access road behind Ensenada wound them higher and higher, pummeling them continuously until they were certain that the tie rods or the A-frame or their bodies would shake loose and break apart at the very next turn. The lane shrank to a mere dirt strip, then to a crumbling shale-and-sandstone ledge cut impossibly around the backs of the hills, a tortuous serpentine above abandoned farmland and the unchecked acreage between the mountains and the sea. Twice at least one of the wheels left the road entirely; they had to pile out and lay wild branches under the tires to get across fissures that had no bottom. Martin felt his kidneys begin to ache under the endless pounding. One of the boys threw up and continued to retch over the side until Will decided they had gone far enough, but no one opened his mouth to complain. After more than an hour, they set the hand brake at the start of a primitive downslope, blocked the wheels with granite chips and stumbled the rest of the way, numb and reeling.

The silence was overpowering. Nothing moved, except for the random scrabbling of lizards and the falling of individual leaves and blades of grass. As they dragged the sack down to the meadows, Martin concentrated on the ribbon of dirt they had driven, watching for the first sign of another car, however unlikely that was. A small, puddled heat mirage shimmered on the dust, coiled

and waiting to be splashed. A squirrel darted across the road, silhouetted as it paused in stop-motion, twitched its pointed head and then ran on, disappearing like an escaped shooting gallery target. Great powdered monarch butterflies aimlessly swam the convection currents; like back home, he thought. Yes, of course; I should have known. Only too much like home.

“Dig here,” said Will.

The old wound in Martin’s foot was hurting him again. He had thought it would be healed by now, but it wasn’t. He rocked back wearily on one heel. A withered vine caught at his ankle. It snapped easily with a dull, fleshy sound as he shook free. He took another step, and something moist and solid broke underfoot. He looked down.

He kicked at the grass. It was only a tiny melon, one of dozens scattered nearby and dying on the vine. He rolled it over, revealing its soft underbelly. Too much rain this season, he thought absently; too much or too little, nourishing them excessively or not enough. What was the answer? He picked it up and lobbed it over their heads. It splattered on the road in a burst of pink. Watermelons, he thought, while fully-formed seeds pale as unborn larvae slithered off his shoe and into the damp grass. Who planted them here? And who will return for the harvest, only to find them already gone to seed? He stooped and wiped his hand. There was a faint but unmistakable throb and murmur in the ground, as though through a railroad track, announcing an unseen approach from miles away.

“What are you going to do, Jackie?”

Martin stared back at Will. He hadn’t expected the question, not now.

“It’s like this,” said Will, taking him to one side. “Michael, for one, wants to get back to his own van and head on deeper into Baja, lay low for a few days. He wasn’t registered, so there’s no connection. Some of the others sound like they’re up for the same, or for going north right away, tonight. Kevin’s due to check out today, anyway.”

“And you?”

“Don’t know yet. I haven’t decided. I’ll probably stay on for appearances, but you do what you want. I wouldn’t worry about the maid or anyone coming by to check up. Anyway, we hosed off the patio. Nobody else saw a thing, I’m sure. The girls don’t know anything about it.”

There was a grunt. The sack, being lowered, had split open at the seams. Hands hurried to reclose it.

“What’s that?”

Will grabbed a wrist. A silver bracelet inlaid with polished turquoise glittered against a bronze tan in the afternoon light.

“I—I bought it.”

“Sure you did,” said Will.

“I brought it with me on the trip. Ask my girl. She—”

Will stripped it off the arm and flung it into the shallow grave. “You want to get out of this alive, kiddo? That kind of work can be traced. Or didn’t you think of that? You didn’t think, did you? What else did you steal from him while you were at it yesterday? Is that why he came back last night? Is it?”

“Lookit, man, where do you get off—”

“We all hang together,” said Will, “or we all hang together. Get it?”

He got to his knees to close the sack. As an afterthought, he reached deep and rifled the dead child’s pockets for anything that might tie in with Quintas Papagayo.

His hand stopped. He withdrew a wad of paper money which fell open, a flower on his palm. A roll of American dollars, traveler’s checks, credit cards.

“Hey, that’s—”

“I had eighty bucks on me when—”

Martin joined him in examining the roll. The checks were signed NORMAN & BERNICE WINSLOW. Two of the cards, embossed on the front and signed on the back, read JACK MARTIN.

“Knew I was right!” said the one in the felt hat. “Fuck if I wasn’t! Lookit that! The little son of a bitch ...”

Martin straight-armed the wheel, running in darkness.

He reminded himself of the five-dollar bill clipped to the back of his license. Then he remembered that his wallet was flat, except for the credit cards. Motorcycle cops passed him like fugitive Hell’s Angels. He kicked on the lights of his rented car and thought of the last news tape of the great Karl Wallenda. He had been running, too, though in wind, not fog, toward or away from something.

Did he look back, I wonder? Was that why it happened?

... Heading for the end, his last that day was weak. Or maybe he looked ahead that once, saw it was the same, and just gave up the ghost. No, not Wallenda. For him the game was running while pretending not to—or the other way around. Was that his private joke? Even in Puerto Rico, for him the walk was all. *Keep your head clear*, he wanted to tell Wallenda. For that was how it finished, stopping to consider. But Wallenda must have known; he had been walking for years. Still he should have remembered ... Martin put on his brights, gripped the steering wheel and made for the border.

He turned on the radio, found an American station.

It was playing a song by a group called The Tubes. He remembered the Tivoli

Night Club, the elevated band playing “Around the World” and “A Kiss to Build a Dream On.” He remembered Hussong’s Cantina, the knife fight that happened, his trip to the Blow Hole, policia with short hair and semiautomatic rifles. The housetrailers parked on the Point, the Point obscured by mist. The military guns with silencers ...

The doll whose parts had been severed, its eyes opening in moonlight.

Shaking, he turned his mind to what lay ahead. He wanted to see someone; he tried to think of her face. Her eyes would find his there under the beam ceiling, the spider plants in the corners growing into the carpet, the waves on Malibu beach, the Pleiades as bright, shining on what was below; the roots between the rocks, the harbor lights like eyes, the anemones closed inward, the gourds and giant mushrooms, the endless pull of riptide, the seagulls white as death’s-heads, the police with trimmed moustaches, the dark ships at anchor ...

He came to a bridge on the tollway. Ahead lay the border.

To his right a sign, a turnoff that would take him back into Baja.

He sat with the motor running, trying to pick a direction.

HOMECOMING by Howard Goldsmith

Howard Goldsmith was born August 24, 1943 in New York City, where he still makes his home—finding New York “a minefield of horror stories splashed daily over the tabloid newspapers.” He attended the City University of New York and the University of Michigan, where he earned an M.A. in psychology. Disillusioned with that field, he left psychology for a career as a full-time writer. While Goldsmith’s stories have appeared in a number of anthologies and magazines, much of his work has been in the juvenile field, where he has written fifteen books (some under the pseudonym, Dayle Courtney.) His first novel, The Whispering Sea (Bobbs-Merril), in which a brother and sister are swept up in a whirl of Satanic rites and demonic possession, received praise from Robert Bloch but little notice from horror fans. Other books include Invasion: 2200 AD (Doubleday), Sooner Round the Corner (Hodder & Stoughton), The Ivy Plot (Standard), Three-Ring Inferno (forthcoming), Spine-Chillers (co-edited with Roger Elwood for Doubleday), and two collections of his own stories, Terror by Night and The Shadow and Other Strange Tales, both book club editions from Xerox Corporation. While Goldsmith cannot point to any specific influences upon his writing, two favorite authors are Algernon Blackwood and Grant Allen, who “had the uncanny knack of stripping away outer appearances to expose the deep strangeness of the truly familiar.”

“Homecoming” appeared in the first issue of Chillers, a short-lived magazine that included fiction along with articles on horror films. Goldsmith writes: “A theme to which I’m often drawn is the interpenetration of co-active strata of consciousness and time streams—the past ever present in associations refracted from childhood.” Such is the theme of “Homecoming.”

Years ago I nicknamed it “Bleak House.” Gazing at its weathered facade again after twenty years, the taunts of neighborhood children rushed back in gusts of memory:

“Your brother’s a loony!”

“Mad dog Sloane!”

“Go away! We don’t want you here.”

Faces flashed before me, undimmed by time. Scowling masks whose expression never softened. Their parents—all but a few—had been too polite to

mention my brother in my presence. But rebuff was stamped into their expressions, rebuff tinctured with unsatisfied curiosity.

I had prepared myself for this moment: the return to my boyhood home. But now, standing on its rickety threshold, I was unable to step inside. Instead I turned and fled from the spot, in the direction of State Street. I set out for the sheriff's office.

It was understandable that Sheriff Thomas didn't recognize me. I was only ten when Aunt Emma bundled me off on the midnight express to Detroit, right after Mom's death. I had never been back.

"Mark Sloane?" He stared at me over the rim of his thick reading glasses.
"How have you been?"

"Pretty good."

Twenty years had sewn deep seams into his leathery face and tinseled his hair with silver. His voice was rougher than I recalled, his eyes harder, slit-like.

"I'm sorry about your stepfather." He didn't look sorry.

"We weren't close. We never saw each other after my mother's death." I had had to suppress an almost grim satisfaction at the news of his passing.

"Not like real family, step-kin."

"No."

I thought of my stepbrother Jed, and the taunts rushed back.

Your brother's a loony!

Mad dog Sloane!

"Have you been over to the house?" Sheriff Thomas asked.

"I passed it on the way down here."

"Do you plan to settle here?"

"I'm not sure. I have to think about it."

"Don't let those wild tales about your brother influence you."

The sheriff was referring to stories that Jed Sloane was one of "the living dead." I didn't put much store in smalltown rumors, but they were persistent. In 1976 Jed had broken out of a prison for the criminally insane. Two other prisoners had participated in the escape. No escapee had ever succeeded in making his way safely through the snake-infested swampland surrounding Newgate Prison. The remains of two of the convicts had eventually been discovered and identified by the county pathologist. One of these was Jed Sloane. The third man was assumed dead, his rotting corpse undoubtedly reposing beneath acres of quicksand.

Yet stories persisted: Jed Sloane arose nightly from the murky depths of the swamp, his prison uniform in tatters, his hair hanging in grimy crusted strands across his shoulders, mud dripping from empty eyesockets lit by an inner

phosphorescent glow. Some reported an unearthly ringing laugh as he lurched madly across the stark moonlit landscape. Animals were found savaged and drained of blood. Farmers were quick to lay the blame to Mad Dog Sloane.

The sheriff and mayor had tried to calm their fears. But then came the attack upon a young couple on Eagle Point, the local Lover's Lane. The boy had been strangled by a person of immense strength, the neck bones crushed. His girlfriend's clothes had been torn off and ripped to shreds. Found alive but incoherent, she quickly lapsed into a mute catatonic rigidity from which she never emerged. There was no evidence that she had been sexually molested.

The sheriff attributed the attack to a vagrant, but townsfolk knew otherwise. It was Jed Sloane arising from his muddy grave. The town locked up tight against this ghoulish invader. But only a month ago another corpse was found: the unidentified nude body of a girl. Her face was missing.

I stared hard into the sheriff's eyes. "Do you think Jed is still alive?"

"Of course not. No one could live in the swamp—and he never made it out."

"Are you satisfied that it was his remains you found?"

"The pathologist was ninety-five percent certain."

"Why not one hundred percent?"

"Because his jaw was decomposed. It couldn't be checked against X-rays."

"Do you have a line on who's responsible for the murders?"

"Nothing that would hold up in a court of law. But we're keeping tabs on a few suspicious characters."

"Local people?"

"I can't go into it at this point."

"Well, I guess I'll mosey over to the lawyer's office."

"Your stepfather didn't leave a will, but you're the only heir. You can take possession of the house at any time."

"I might sell it," I said.

The sheriff rubbed his chin. "It will be difficult to find a buyer, all things considered." He hesitated. I felt he wanted to add something, but held back.

As I was about to leave, he said, "Townspeople don't blame you for your brother, Mark."

I shook hands with him and went over to the lawyer's. Transferring the deed to my name was a simple matter. Lawyer Murchison agreed that the property would be a "hard sell," unless someone decided to build a new house on the foundation. But given local superstition, buyers would be scarce. I indicated that I was considering moving in myself. My stepfather had left three thousand dollars in the bank, which would go toward repairs.

As I headed back to the house, though, the prospect of spending even one

night there oppressed me. From a purely rational point of view, it made sense to move in. I thought of all the rent money that had gone down the drain. First as a college student. Then as a teacher stretching a threadbare income. This was my one chance to live rent-free. It was the kind of break I'd been hoping for. I'd even heard of a vacant teaching post nearby. Yet ...

The house loomed up, gaunt, ungainly, wrapped in absolute stillness. When I was a child, it was the only house on the block, with weeds and stunted trees elbowing for space. Now there was a house on each corner, enclosed by high picket fences.

The sun was going down. No point in putting it off. I turned the key in the lock. A sudden gust threw the door open.

I have you now, kid brother. I have you just where I want you. Don't be afraid. Enter. Step all the way in.

I walked inside and switched on the light. The house was unnaturally cold, in sharp contrast with the balmy outdoor temperature.

It's been many years. You've grown, Mark. But you're still not half the man I am. Not a quarter. Remember how I used to tie your hands and tear your hair till you ran crying to mother? Remember, Mark?

Nerves. Must be. I could swear I heard a voice—a faint dead voice from long ago, fleeing before me, just beyond reach or comprehension.

As I proceeded from room to room, memories drifted back with a sharp prickle of recollection. I could almost hear my mother calling from the kitchen: "Mark, dinner's on the table."

I slowly opened the kitchen door. Empty. I fought down a wave of disappointment. The dead stay dead. Still, I could almost see Mom puttering about the kitchen. I reached out and—

"Mom! Why did you have to leave?" The cry I'd repeated to myself thousands of times welled up inside me. The child, trapped within, still struggled with a reality he could not grasp or accept.

Crying for your Ma, Mark? I'll give you something to cry about. Just wait.

I stepped into the living room. It was much as I remembered it. Heavy mahogany furniture, vintage 1940. A worn Oriental rug. Even the old Victrola; my stepfather had never replaced it.

The Victrola! The tone arm was rising, positioning itself over the turntable. As I watched in disbelief, the turntable started to spin. The stylus fell, scratching, clicking, revolving in its preordained orbit.

"I'd like to get you

On a slow boat to China,

All by ourselves,

All alone.”

Bing Crosby.

“All alone

All alone

All alone.”

The needle was stuck.

“All alone

All alone

All—”

I yanked the tone arm—it flew out of my hand. Another platter plopped into place. The stylus descended.

“All alone

All alone

All alone ...”

I cupped my hands to my ears

“All alone

All alone ...”

The room was turning—

“All ...”

Swaying—

“alone ...”

My head swimming—

“... alone.”

I swung my fist and sent it crashing down on the turntable.

The needle skated across the grooves—zzzzzzzzzt—and began its slow circuit back again. I grabbed the arm and held it, suspended in midair. Something living. Fighting me. My palm was sweaty. It slipped from my grasp, dropped on the record.

“a slow boat—click—China—click—

Alone—click—

Alone

All alone—”

I dropped to my knees and yanked the power cord from the socket.

“Alllonne.”

Bing’s voice dropped an octave, held the note, and died, reluctantly.

The room stopped spinning. I lay on the floor, breathing hard. How had the record player started? There had to be an explanation. The stylus must have rested on the rim of the record. It took only a slight jar—my footsteps, for example—to actuate the mechanism. I wasn’t completely convinced, but at least

it was a reasonable explanation. Gradually my sense of control seeped back; I was no longer overcome by a feeling of helplessness.

As I stood up and walked into the hallway, my eye fell upon the cellar door. As kids, Jed and I used to play down there. Jed was six years older, but acted much younger than his age, despite his tall and hulking appearance. When he got angry, his fury was unbounded, like the tantrum of a gargantuan infant. At thirteen he'd snapped the arm of a gym teacher for refusing to let him have a basketball.

I might as well inspect the cellar. I opened the door and found the light switch. The dim overhead bulb cast a beam of pale, dusty light. A damp and musty odor hung heavily in the air. As I reached the foot of the stairs, I noticed that one of the windows was partway open. I closed it and fastened the latch. Below the window, the remains of rotting spider webs hung down like strands of ancient tapestry.

In a corner stood an old cardboard box overflowing with toys. I began rummaging through the contents, lost in the archaeology of my childhood. A Tom Thumb typewriter, an Official Hockey game, a chemistry lab, an erector set ... I pulled out a Ouija board, recalling the hours Jed and I had watched it spin its mystic messages. Without thinking, I placed my hand upon the planchette—a miniature tripod mounted on casters that rolled across the board, tracing out letters. Something stirred inside me, a heightened sense of uneasiness, and I turned with a start. For it seemed as if someone had crept up close behind me and was staring over my shoulder. A shiver raced down my back. And then, for a moment, I felt the distinct pressure of an invisible hand resting on the opposite side of the planchette! Just as suddenly it lifted and, as if released, the planchette spun across the board, stopping at the letter D.

My hand was trembling as the planchette rolled back to the center of the board. It began to move again, by slow degrees. My hand seemed glued to it, unable to resist its movement, even by a concentrated act of will. I watched, fascinated, as it stopped at the letter A and proceeded across the board, spelling out the word DANGER.

My subconscious mind was guiding my hand. It was delivering a warning to me. That was the only explanation. Unless—

“Is someone in this room with me?” I asked out loud.

The planchette spun across to the word YES.

“Are you my stepfather?”

The indicator rotated, pointing to NO.

“Mother?”

The planchette reversed itself. YES.

I'd really gone off the deep end, I thought to myself—conversing with spirits! I regarded myself as a skeptic in psychical matters. I didn't believe in an afterlife. But there was a part of me, usually suppressed, that yearned to believe, and I was letting it run away with me. I grasped desperately at the possibility of communicating with my mother, while deriding my suggestibility.

The planchette began to move again. Swiftly it spelled out G-E-T, paused, then rolled on to the letters O-U-T.

"Get out of the cellar?"

H-O-U-S-E.

"Get out of the house?"

YES.

"There's danger in the house?"

The planchette spelled out J-E-D.

Jed! I felt an aching constriction in my throat. Jed in the house with me.

Panicky, I fled up the stairs, seized the doorknob and—The door was stuck! God, no! I reared back and threw my weight against it. Repeatedly. Until the frame splintered and the door rocked open.

D-r-r-r-ring. The phone. On the hallway table. I snatched it up, out of breath.

"Hello?"

"I'd like to get you ... All by ourselves ... All alone. All alone—"

"Who is it?" I screamed.

"All by ourselves ... All alone—"

The receiver fell from my hand, clattering to the floor.

"All alone. All alone ..."

The insane refrain continued until I dived for the receiver and slammed it back in place.

"Jed, are you here, in the house with me?" I yelled, my voice breaking.

Silence.

"Come out and show yourself!"

Silence.

"If you're a ghost, materialize! Do your stuff!"

Do you really expect an answer? I berated myself. *You're an hysterical fool.*
The house is empty.

But the phone. How do you explain the phone?

I can't explain it. Maybe it's a prank. A neighbor's kid. Heard me playing the record—so now he's playing it over the phone for kicks.

That's pretty thin. Who you kidding? Explain the Ouija board.

My own hand was moving the planchette, directed by my subconscious.
Psychoanalysts could explain it quite easily. Unconscious fears, guilt, surfacing

in fantasy. The child is father of the man.

Crap!

I stood vibrating with tension, propped against the wall. All nerves. I wasn't going to let nerves defeat me. In college I dreaded public speaking. So I forced myself to attend speech classes. Afterwards, I still got stage fright, but I learned to live with it.

And now—I wanted to leave so badly I could almost feel my legs propelling me toward the door.

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE.

Leave. Put the house up for sale. Maybe someone—But I'd always hate myself for a coward.

Reluctantly, I started up the stairs, my legs as rigid as stilts.

Yes, come upstairs, young master. Lord and master of the house. I'm waiting for you. I've been waiting a long time.

Again a voice seemed to fly before me in a flurry of near-inaudible echoes. Echoes that hinted of the past but hovered just beyond the reach of understanding. I couldn't identify words; yet there was a voice. A cold wave swept over me, an icy premonition of misfortune.

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE.

I halted at the top of the stairs, then turned toward my old bedroom. The door was closed. I pushed it open and snapped on the light.

My stepfather! I flinched back in shock. His eyes were riveted on me, unblinking, glaring straight through me. His craggy, rockbound face was fixed in a grudging smile. Or was it a scowl?

It gave me a jar, seeing the old boy again, even framed in a portrait above my bed. He must have taken my room after I left home. The smell of stale pipe tobacco still clung to the faded yellow wallpaper. I turned the portrait to the wall and let in some air.

The bed was made. He was always neat as a pin, and quick to find fault with others less scrupulous. I took the blanket and threw it in a heap on the floor. Then I fell into bed exhausted.

I woke with a start. The room was pitch-black. Someone was calling. Or was I dreaming? I sat up on one elbow. A volley of loud, raucous voices swept across the hallway. For a moment I wanted to duck under the sheet, as I did when a child in the same bed. Instead I shouted, "Who is it?"

The voices continued without pause, a jumble of indistinguishable sounds. I hauled myself out of bed, crossed to the door, and peeked out. The corridor was empty! Yet the clamor continued. It must be coming from upstairs. The attic.

Tiptoeing down the hall, I mounted the ladder to the attic. There was a shrill

outcry as I pushed the trapdoor open and glanced inside. A pale stream of light radiated across the room. It emanated from a television set. Our old Dumont 16-inch TV with a circular screen, purchased in 1950. It had broken down years ago, to be replaced by an RCA console. Yet it was playing at full volume!

Howdy Doody pointed to a calendar. November, 1955! “Do you know what holiday comes next week, boys and girls?”

“Thanksgiving Day!” the Peanut Gallery chorused.

Buffalo Bob Smith told the children that old Phineas T. Bluster was opposed to children celebrating Thanksgiving Day.

“Boo!” cried Double Doody, Howdy’s twin brother.

Clarabell the clown honked his horn in disapproval.

“Don’t you want to celebrate Thanksgiving, kids?” Buffalo Bob asked.

“Yes,” the Peanut Gallery cried.

The Flubadub pranced out on the stage: a creature with a dog’s ears, a duck’s head, cat’s whiskers, a giraffe’s neck, a raccoon’s tale, and a feather-covered body. He gave Phineas T. Bluster a nip on the backside.

The children roared with laughter.

Uncannily, I seemed to remember that episode. November, 1955. But how—?

I turned the channel selector to 2. Arthur Godfrey and all “the little Godfreys” appeared on the screen. On channel 5 Art Linkletter rummaged through a woman’s handbag. Channel 7: The Mouseketeers. Channel 9: Superman.

I watched with a feeling of unreality, of being out of sync with time as I knew it. Images of the past flickered past in kaleidoscopic succession until, suddenly, the picture scrambled. This lasted for a few moments. Then Ralph Edwards came on the screen.

“This is your life, Mark Sloane!” He held a large photograph album with my name engraved on it.

I reeled back, feeling shaky and dazed.

“Do you remember this voice, Mark?”

“Hello, Mark, I’m the girl with blond pigtails you loved to dip in the inkwell.”

“Marge Gillespie!” I cried. “Oh my God!” My face turned red with embarrassment.

“Yes, Marge Gillespie, Mark.”

A dumpy-looking girl of nine marched out on the stage.

Then another offstage voice called out. “Remember me, Mark? We used to pinch apples from Mr. Myers’ orchard.”

Willie Nelson!

Willie bounded out, waving his hands. He didn’t look a day older. “Hi, Mark, how you been?”

My head swam with confusion. And then—

“Have you done your homework?”

Mom was standing in the kitchen next to a young boy. He turned and faced me for an instant. I gave a gasp. It was me at age ten.

“I was just going upstairs, Mom,” I answered, making for the door. I heard my footsteps on the staircase.

My mother bent over the stove, her back to me.

Jed suddenly slid into view at the right of the screen. He crossed the room softly on bare feet, holding something in his right hand. A kitchen knife! His arm swung back as he crept up behind my mother.

“Mom!” I screamed. “Watch out! Jed has a knife!”

She couldn’t hear me. They were enacting a scene from the past.

“Mom!” I fell to my knees, pounding my fists on the television screen.

The knife plunged through the small of her back. She gave a shriek, fell forward on the stove, and slumped to the floor.

I sobbed with an anguish I had not known since I was ten. That was how my mother had died—at the hands of my stepbrother. My family had concealed the facts from me. I may have suspected it, but pushed the thought away. My aunt came for me that day and whisked me off to her home, where I remained for ten years.

My attention turned to the screen again. Jed was standing over Mom. Abruptly he darted out the back door and returned a minute later, holding an axe. He entered the hall and started up the stairs.

He’s coming upstairs!

GET OUT OF THE HOUSE.

As he neared the top of the stairs, the picture wavered and Jed’s features began to dissolve. Lines appeared in his forehead; fissures formed at the corners of his mouth. He was aging before my eyes. The Jed that crossed the landing was a fully grown man, wielding an axe. He made for the attic. I saw him mount the ladder.

“I’d like to get you ... All by ourselves. All alone—”

His footsteps grew closer. With one agile bound, Jed heaved himself up into the attic, an empty grin bisecting his face. He brandished the axe.

“NOOOOOO!”

My legs collapsed. He towered above me, shoulders bulky, features coarse and heavy.

Now to finish you off.

“Jed, don’t!” I scrambled to my feet.

You took everything from me—my father, my father’s love. You stole him. You

and your mother. Now you have the house, rightfully mine.

“You can keep the house, Jed. I don’t want it. I’ll leave now.”

You’re lying. They’ll come for me. Just like before. You’ll call them.

“I won’t, Jed. I promise. The house is yours. I’m leaving now.”

You’re not leaving. You’ll never leave!

He swung the axe. It slashed the air above my head. I backed away, slipped, and fell to one knee.

The axe came down and—

Jed lurched backward, as if pulled from behind. He screamed out with shock and fury as he tumbled against the television set.

My mother’s face swam up on the screen. She was pressing the point of the kitchen knife to Jed’s back. His features convulsed as a thick smear spread across the back of his shirt. A gray ectoplasmic fluid oozed down his sides, and Jed seemed to shrivel in size.

He was being drawn into the screen, kicking and screaming. His shoulders had already disappeared and his torso was quickly fading from sight. He made one last strenuous effort to resist the backward tug. Then he whirled away from me, breaking into atoms of light and dark as the last vestiges of form dissolved into the picture tube.

His body flashed up on the screen, lying motionless beside my mother.

With a tremendous effort, I pulled myself together and dashed downstairs to the kitchen.

It was empty. Except—

On the floor lay a seven-inch kitchen knife.

OLD HOBBY HORSE by A.F. Kidd

Rosemary Pardoe's excellent series of chapbooks devoted to M.R. James has become an annual publication, and each of the three issues of Ghosts & Scholars has included a story written and illustrated by A.F. Kidd. Kidd was born April 21, 1953 in Nottingham; she was educated in Shropshire, read law at King's College, London, and has now settled in the South of England, working as an advertising copywriter. Kidd's interests in writing, drawing, and cinema pushed a law career aside. She writes that she has also been a newspaper film critic and cartoonist, has written slushy verse for greeting cards, and is currently collaborating on a science fiction novel.

"Old Hobby Horse" is A.F. Kidd's third published story. It is based on an idea by M.R. James, outlined in his essay, "Stories I Have Tried to Write." In this essay, James described a number of "stories which have crossed my mind from time to time and never materialized properly. Never properly: for some of them I have actually written down, and they repose in a drawer somewhere ... Let me recall them for the benefit (so to style it) of somebody else." "Old Hobby Horse" is based on only a single incident described by James, the plot and writing being entirely Kidd's. I think the Old Master would have been pleased with her extrapolation.

Those who have travelled or resided in the county of Kent will no doubt have encountered a large number of inns each claiming the distinction of being the oldest in the country (although I am of the, possibly biased, opinion that the claims of certain pubs in Nottinghamshire for this honour are more likely to be true).

The Kentish claimants are alike almost to the point of stereotype, though I am by no means denying their attraction: low-beamed affairs, bedecked with hops, and equipped to a greater or lesser degree with the requisite stone flags, open hearths, etcetera, necessary to their status; and with the more recent innovations of refrigerators displaying assortments of cold comestibles. The more enterprising, indeed, indulge in such commercial trivia as paper napkins, beer-mats, and even garments printed with the hostelry's name.

I had been conducted to one of these picturesque, if selfconsciously so, establishments, by an acquaintance with whom I was staying. Having expressed

due appreciation of the exceedingly smoky fire, open on four sides and subject to a particularly vindictive down-draught which made my eyes smart; and of the antiquely smooth oaken seats, prolonged sitting on one of which was proving singularly distressing; I was quite prepared to entertain its claim. Indeed, the original furnishings seemed to have been retained, as my discomfort could testify.

After a while, my friend remarked, "I didn't only bring you here for the beer."

"The beer," I replied, with sincerity, "is superb. Want a refill?"

The formalities observed, I asked him, not without resignation, "So what was this ulterior motive of yours?"

"Atmosphere," he said, "I've got a story for you." And he proceeded to relate the following narrative.

"They do a lot of Morris dancing down here," he began. I interrupted to beseech him not to fill his tale with things of which I was already aware. In the summer, as I had observed not infrequently, most of the local pubs were besieged by throngs of thirsty young men in white trousers and eccentric headgear, whose steps, by the end of the day, had become less precise than they might be. My friend continued.

At one time, he said, he was quite interested in folklore (which I imagine would come easily to an historian, at least in cases where the two can be separated), but not to the extent of, as he put it, fooling around in cricket gear and waving a napkin in the air. Nonetheless, he would sometimes go out of his way to watch the dancing: the first performance he had seen since childhood, in fact, took place outside the pub we were sitting in. Not, he admitted, that he remembered much about it other than the fact that one of the dances had involved the banging together of sticks and the kicking over of a pint of beer which had inadvertently been left too close to the field of action.

Gradually, for some reason, he became almost obsessed by the subject, and spent a considerable amount of time travelling around the county in pursuit of groups of dancers. They were willing enough to accept the beer he bought them, and to talk—but their talk was of almost any topic other than folklore. With regret, my friend concluded that a group of modern-day Morris dancers was no different from a group of cricket enthusiasts or football fans—young people whose shared interest was simply an excuse for getting together and drinking unencumbered by wives. Genuine historical interest, he saw, could be furthered only by serious study.

However, such research was hampered by the discovery that the local libraries seemed singularly ill-stocked in this respect, and even such museums as he found proved mere haphazard collections of trivia. He was eventually persuaded

that study would be facilitated only by recourse to various private collections of which he had become aware.

Discovering the whereabouts of these turned out to be a far more onerous task than he had imagined, although once found, his not inconsiderable reputation as an historian gained him admittance quite readily.

If he had thought that the worst of his troubles were over, he was due for a bitter disappointment. After weeks of travelling around some of the larger and more gloomy country houses, and becoming more and more depressed, he was quite ready to abandon the whole enterprise.

It was in this mood of frustration that he received a letter from a gentleman by the name of Somerville, inviting him to come and view his collection of ‘objets d’art’, as his correspondent somewhat pretentiously described them. My friend was more than half inclined to ignore the invitation, suspecting charlatanism and worse, and being, in any case, more than ready to give up on his study of traditional dances in Kent. His publisher was clamouring for the MS of his current book, and consequently my friend was suffering from that peculiar breed of guilt known well by those who miss deadlines.

However, as the reader will no doubt have guessed (for otherwise there would be no story) he did, at length, decide to accept the invitation, and wrote accordingly to Mr Somerville.

The minor roads in Kent are ill-equipped with signposts and a great majority are in a lamentable state of repair. These obstructions, coupled with the fact that it was raining quite heavily, conspired together to make my friend three-quarters of an hour late for his appointment. Suffering in almost equal proportions from a violent headache and an attack of extremely bad temper, the spectacle of Mr Somerville’s house, and, shortly afterwards, Mr Somerville himself, hardly constituted an emollient.

My friend thought to himself that rarely had he seen a building so remarkable in its hideousness. It was constructed somewhat on the lines of St Pancras Station (but lacking that edifice’s engaging Gothic charm) out of a bright red brick of a peculiarly smooth and unpleasing texture. Mr Somerville’s appearance proved to be entirely in keeping with his house: indeed, his florid features appeared, at first glance, to be constructed of the same garish material, and the tasteless ostentation of his tie and jacket (what my friend referred to, somewhat unkindly, as a ‘Max Miller suit’) produced an effect not unlike that of the house.

“Mr Somerville?” enquired my friend, with sinking heart.

“Yes, yes, me dear chap, come on in.”

Somerville led him to the library, which was furnished in the deplorable taste my friend expected, and gave him a glass of soda water with an infinitesimal

amount of whisky in it. This he contrived (for he has a detestation of soda water, although he felt somewhat in need of alcoholic refreshment) to tip into a vulgar-looking receptacle holding a withered rubber-plant, and enquired where Mr Somerville kept his collection.

Accompanied by a highly coloured and no doubt largely mendacious account by his host of the acquisition of various items, my friend managed to examine the objects. As he had feared, they were bunched together with no indication of either intellect or taste: blatant fakes jostled equally with artifacts notable only for their crudity and with a few genuine rarities, all of which Somerville seemed to treat with equal reverence. While his host endeavoured to interest him in a decaying fowl in a glass case, which had been none too expertly made to incorporate an extra pair of legs, my friend was admiring a small blue glass bowl. It was, he thought, Venetian, and of some little value; its lines were very pleasing. Somerville referred to it as an ashtray, and drew his attention to a ship's figurehead which leered from a corner.

By this time, my friend's headache was demanding most of his attention, and it was quite by accident that he became aware of an intriguing, if incomplete, set of ceramic figures. Although their colours were garish, their execution lacking in subtlety, and their glaze uneven, they caught his eye for two reasons. One, the remarkable power which they seemed to have; and two, their relevance to his quest. They dated, he judged, from the late eighteenth century, and comprised, inter alia, a remarkably hideous representation of Jack-in-the-Green and a beribboned and malevolent-looking Hobby Horse, which reminded him uncomfortably of Fuseli's 'Nightmare'.

Somerville, noticing his interest, pointed out a print hanging nearby entitled "Southfield Morris", depicting dancers outside an inn (the same one, in fact, that my friend had led me to in order to relate this story). It had, my friend says, a menacing aspect, which he was totally unable to explain or interpret.

There was one further item of interest, which his host allowed him to borrow: a pamphlet which he subsequently photo-copied before returning it (by registered post: he could not face another interview with its boorish owner). This copy he now handed to me.

It was entitled, "A True Account of Traditional Dances in the County of Kent", and the passage headed "Southfield Morris" had been marked in red ink. The page was all but disintegrating along the lines where it had been folded. I forget the idiosyncrasies of spelling and phraseology, but the gist was along these lines:

'The dance is symbolic of the death of Winter and the coming of Spring. This is signified by the enacted decapitation of the figure portraying Winter, from

whose corpse arises the leafy representation of Spring in the persona of Jack-in-the-Green. It is believed in these parts that at one time Spring would literally fail to come were the ritual not enacted. The figure of Winter is robed in white to signify snow and is “slain” by a masked dancer armed with a sword.’

I read this, and handed it back, remarking, “Unusual, but there are familiar elements. Why did you stop your research?”

“Something happened. Something very odd.”

“Well go on, astonish me.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that … I’m just afraid of the sequel.”

At this point, my friend, whose sense of the dramatic is not underdeveloped, broke off to adjourn once more to the bar. On his return he sat silently for a time, whether in reluctance or indecision I had no way of telling. Eventually he resumed.

For some days after his visit to Mr Somerville, he told me, he was aware of a certain uneasiness of spirit, as if a weight of responsibility or guilt had been imposed upon him. He found himself frequently looking over his shoulder or being alarmed by slight movements out of the corner of his eye; movements which his rational mind knew were no more than the shifting of a curtain in the draught.

He had never been a particularly impressionable person: imaginative, yes, but not undisciplinedly so—therefore this inexplicable nervousness was difficult to attribute to mere imagination. One evening, about a week after his visit to Somerville—the date was late in April—he was sitting in his study putting the finishing touches to the MS which had been so sadly neglected of late, when the sense of being watched suddenly intensified. It increased to such an extent, in fact, that he actually felt the hairs on the back of his neck literally begin to prickle.

At the same time, he became aware that a tune was running round in his head, one which he recognized as having been in the back of his mind for some time. It was a Morris tune, and by this time his senses were so abnormally heightened that he felt he was actually hearing it, as distinct from being merely an echo in his brain. Why he should think so he could not say, but he was convinced that what he was hearing was the “Southfield Morris”.

He abandoned his work for a minute or so, until he was startled into turning by what sounded like the stealthy opening of the window. In the slight gap between the curtains he perceived a face. It was a blank, dead face, with the pale waxy complexion of a corpse; but the eyes which stared from it were so unpleasantly out of place in their living, malevolent *awareness* that they made the apparition somehow far more terrible. There was a kind of awful gloating

expression in them—even, maybe, hunger.

There is such horror in the totally impossible that you might suppose him to have been rooted to the spot; but this was not the case. In a panic, he leapt to his feet and tore the curtains apart with an almost convulsive gesture. Something fell on his foot, something with an unpleasant soft texture: he jumped away from it.

Behind the curtains was the closed window: the latch was securely fastened.

He looked down, then, to see what had fallen, and found nothing more than a perfectly ordinary mask made of pasteboard. Nevertheless, and perhaps understandably, he could not bring himself to pick it up for some considerable time. When he did so he found it such a totally innocuous object that he began to laugh—but not, indeed, without a certain amount of hysterical relief.

The only thing which bothered him, apart from wondering how the mask came to be there, was this: whose were the eyes which had peered through the blank slits in the mask?

“And the sequel?” I enquired.

“I want you to meet someone first,” said my friend, indicating, with what I felt was an unnecessarily histrionic gesture (since he nearly knocked my beer over in the process) a wizened individual seated in a corner. I regarded him with some distaste: he was one of those persons referred to by condescending tourists as a ‘character’, and whose evil odour, I presume, is supposed merely to add to the period charm of their eccentricity. His attention appeared to be equally divided between his beer and a noisome pipe down which, judging from the sound-effects, he seemed to be spitting. A villainous-looking dog was lying by his feet, its nose jammed against the most unwholesome pair of boots I had seen for a long time, which either says a great deal for its tolerance or very little for its olfactory sensibility.

I followed my friend resignedly over to this unpleasing specimen, who was introduced as Simms. He eyed me craftily and I took the hint and bought some more beer. When I returned, Simms was knocking tarry black dottle out of his pipe, which he then proceeded to refill with what looked like well-rotted manure. This process took up several minutes.

“Mr Durham,” my friend said, indicating me, “would like to hear about the Southfield.”

Simms hawked and spat for a while. After this he took the pipe out of his mouth and considered it, possibly for inspiration. At length, he said, “My grandad, ’e were Southfield dancer.”

The pipe-sucking which followed this statement went on for so long that I began to wonder whether this was the sum total of the information in Simms’s possession.

"Did away with Southfield in my grandad's day," he observed eventually. "I were born in 1890."

I found this hard to credit: decrepit as he appeared, he looked hardly more than sixty-five.

"Fertility dance, it were. Makin' crops grow 'n wimmen conceive. May day dance. Know about May day, do yer?" I nodded. "Tell yer why they done away with it. My owd grandad, 'e were the Jack, an' Winter, 'e were called Joe 'awkins; an' owd 'obby 'orse an' th'un with the mask, 'is name were Bill Thomson."

My friend muttered, "The same dancer for the Horse and the killer of the winter—odd, that."

Simms cast a jaundiced eye at him, and addressed himself once more to his unspeakable pipe, waiting until he had coaxed some noxious fumes from it before starting to speak again.

"Nar this Bill Thomson 'e caught Joe 'awkins tumblin' 'is wife, so 'e thrashes 'im good an' proper. Nar you'd a thought 'e would of scared Joe 'awkins off, wooden yer?"

"Yes, get on with it," said my friend, earning another malicious glance.

"Not 'im, 'e comes braggin' all round the place as 'ow this owd fertility dance 'as put new life into 'im, know what I mean?" Simms accompanied this tasteless information with a toothless snigger and an evil leer in my direction. As I was at that moment looking past him to some girls at the bar, this served to embarrass me somewhat, and I took a mouthful of beer to hide my confusion.

"So this Bill Thomson, 'e says to 'imself 'e'll settle Joe 'awkins for good, all burned up with envy an' anger, 'e were. Come the nex' day, May day as was, all ready for the dancin', there they all are for Southfield. Come up the time to kill the Winter, there's Bill Thomson ups wi' the sword, what everyone knowed was on'y made o' wood, an' lops off Joe 'awkins' 'ead like a scythe cuttin' corn. An' when they looks for Bill Thomson, 'e's nowhere to be found, not till they come to Joe 'awkins' 'ouse and there's Bill cowd as mutton with a pitchfork stuck in 'is chest nailin' 'im to the floor, gouts o' blood all over." Simms gurgled into his pipe with relish. "Been dead an' cowd since the night before, but 'e come back all right in 'is mask an' all to kill the Winter in the Southfield. An' that's why they done away with it."

Driving back to my friend's house, he broke a long silence to say to me, "Now you see why I lost interest in folk-dancing."

"Yes," I said, "Good thing you made the connection, with May Day coming up."

"I nearly didn't," admitted my friend, "until my publisher sent me some

copies of my last opus."

There was one stuck under the dashboard. I pulled it out: his name was given prominence on the cover, which was quite plain apart from the words, "History in Perspective. By C.H. Winter."

FIRSTBORN by David Campton

“Firstborn” is a rare piece of fiction from David Campton, who is far better known as a playwright. A native of Leicester, Campton has written some seventy plays, in addition to numerous radio and television dramas. Born June 5, 1924, Campton served in the Royal Air Force during World War II and afterward performed on stage himself before giving up acting in 1963. Beginning with Going Home in 1950, Campton’s plays have ranged from romantic comedy (Roses Round the Door) to imaginative drama (The Life and Death of Almost Everybody) to science fiction satire such as Mutatis Mutandis, Then, Incident, Soldier from the Wars Returning, or Little Brother, Little Sister, a post-nuclear holocaust drama in which two children are raised in a bunker by the family cook. This spring the Haymarket Theater in Leicester produced Campton’s stage adaptation of Frankenstein.

David Campton’s occasional forays into short fiction have mostly appeared in anthologies, notably those edited by Richard Davis and by David Sutton in England and by Stuart David Schiff in the United States. Robert Bloch has said that horror and humor are two sides of the same coin. In “Firstborn” Campton demonstrates this to perfection.

There were questions to be answered.

As the gale hurled more snow at the window of Harry’s cottage I asked myself what I was doing here. The pure malt I sipped was hardly the answer: the local product made a visit to this ice-raked wilderness bearable, but I wasn’t here for the whisky. To be honest, I had hoped that, since coming into his late uncle’s thousands, Harry might be good for another touch; otherwise, when he suggested the jaunt, I might not have so willingly traded civilisation for cold quarters in a converted barn. But what was a hot-house plant like Harry doing in the highest of the Highlands anyway?

Moreover Harry’s elegant Elaine was here too in this croft north of Inverness. Why?—at this time of all times in a woman’s life. Surely persons of substance expect their firstborn to be delivered with all the advantages of modern obstetrics. Instead of which Elaine, who at a pinch could always make do with the best, was holding her breath in the whitewashed bedroom next to us, while the local midwife did whatever local midwives do. The atmosphere was charged

with unvoiced questions.

At a sharp cry from the next room Harry paused in midglass. The Scottish tones of the midwife's response, half-chiding, half-reassuring, were muffled by the closed door. Harry opened his mouth, but only managed a creak from the back of his throat. The expectant father's face shown in the light of the stoked-up fire. His eyes tried to focus on objects beyond the flicker of the leaping flames. He wanted to talk, and only needed enough Scotch in him to flush out the words. At last he plunged.

"Trust you, Gerry," he mumbled.

"Hope so." Detecting a certain lack of conviction in his tone, I hastened to reassure him. "After all, I owe so much to you." The literal truth—all those IOUs.

This comfort induced a wry smile. "That's why it has to be you. Here, I mean. In case ..." He tossed another log onto the fire. "First you ought to know about ... Not fair to face you with ... Of course, it might not after all—in which case there's no harm ... But if it should be necessary ..." He kicked the log, sending a burst of sparks up the chimney.

Had I betrayed signs of uneasiness? He patted my shoulder, and paced from wall to wall of the tiny room—four steps each way. "That's why we're out here in the wilds, of course. Nobody else to ... The midwife's a risk, but money's a great persuader, eh?"

I nodded agreement over the rim of my glass.

"How else did the old boy coax us down to Dorset?" he went on. "Money called. Elaine didn't even query the social life in Dorset, which meant that even she understood the situation. The wolves were gathering—you're familiar with the signs: bills in red with great threatening stamps all over them; 'phone dead; supplies cut off; friends suddenly out of town. At the clink of Uncle's money bags we packed the little we had to pack and accepted what he offered without leaving a forwarding address for our creditors."

"Uncle must have heard a whisper of our little local difficulties, but that didn't explain this uncharacteristic generosity. True, I was his surviving nearest and dearest, but until then he'd hardly acknowledged my existence. I didn't believe his guff about being lonely. He'd lived alone all his life and, being past the seventy mark, must have been used to his own company. For forty or more years he'd devoted himself to making money in the City with a ruthless singlemindedness that ruled out friends. He may have had an acquaintance or two at one time but almost certainly threw them to the sharks whenever profit was involved. Uncle loved Uncle and money, which didn't leave much affection over for anyone else. Not even my beautiful Elaine. He asked specially for

Elaine. Obviously in some way or another we were expected to sing for our suppers; but a straw looks like a life-boat to a drowning man. Dorset was the Promised Land.

“Uncle had built the place there just over a year before. Between retirement and moving into this retreat he had lived abroad. He never mentioned those years to us: whatever we learned about them we gleaned from another source. The architect of the new building must have been utterly undistinguished, as not a single aspect of it was designed to catch the eye. The more remarkable features had been added to my uncle’s own specifications, and we were only to learn about them in due course. His home was distant enough from civilisation to satisfy a demanding recluse. The taxi fare from the station took away my breath and all but a jingle of small change.

“I suppose it was typical of the very rich that Uncle never considered reimbursing our travelling expenses. So there we were on his doorstep like orphans at Barnardo’s, dependent on his charitable whims.

“Oddly we felt neither downcast nor apprehensive. Sunshine helped—remember last May’s early heatwave? Although the house was nothing to write home about, the garden was a delight. Bees were busily doing whatever bees are supposed to do, and the flowers were encouraging them. Their scent would have been worth a fortune in a bottle. Elaine seemed to think so too: she paused half-way up the garden path, nose twitching and an expression of silly bliss on her face. That slight indulgence gave Uncle time to establish himself on the front porch with welcoming gestures.

“He was an undersized monkey of a man whose grin stretched from ear to ear exposing an unconvincing set of teeth. His bright eyes twinkled like frost. Obviously we measured up to his expectations. Elaine particularly. He fondled her hand in both his shrivelled paws, and stood on tip-toe to kiss her cheek.

“His enthusing over how much he was going to enjoy having us with him had a ring of the double entendre. As Elaine’s eyes met mine over his wrinkled head she raised a questioning brow. I replied with a reassuring smile—whatever lecherous impulses my superannuated relative may have harboured, he was surely past exercising them.

“After which we were introduced to the guest room, then given lunch. The appointments were new and luxurious. I suspected they had been ordered specially for us. The food was as good as deep-freeze and micro-wave could rise to. The wine was excellent. I had a feeling that Elaine was going to be happy for a while. Between meals she was able to stretch out, suitably anointed, on the green velvet lawn exposing herself to the sun; her gleaming skin tanning to the caramel that blended so well with her butterscotch hair. I caught Uncle licking

his lips like a small boy at a sweet-shop window. Well, age can have few compensations, and who was I to intrude on his naughty fantasies? I had daydreams of my own.

“I had plenty of time for them, too. The house, equipped with every modern labour saver, more or less ran itself while Uncle pottered among his plants. In spite of his initial pressing invitation the old boy paid far more attention to his seedlings than to his guests. He presided over meals and presumed that concluded his duties as host. His concentration on the paraphernalia of propagation almost amounted to mania. As an ancient is entitled to his eccentricities, I left him to them. By the third day, though, boredom had led me to the greenhouses.

“We hadn’t been warned that they were out of bounds. When I tried one of the doors, and it wouldn’t open, I assumed it was merely stuck. I was just heaving on the handle when Uncle bounded up, shrieking.

“I didn’t exactly quail, because I’m not the quailing sort; but I must have looked somewhat blasted, because he suddenly cut his wrath short and apologised, giving me the monkey grin with nothing behind it but teeth. On my side I agreed that botanical experiments can be a sensitive area; and on his side he promised a guided tour of the potting sheds.

“While I’m fond enough of fruit and flowers on the table, I’ve never been one for prying into their private lives. However, I had nothing better to do, and as our comfort depended on keeping Uncle sweet, I trailed behind, playing up an interest I didn’t exactly feel.

“The first greenhouse was all orchids. Some were pretty; some were bizarre. Uncle explained he had started with orchids. While still in the full vigour of his late fifties, piling thousands upon thousands, his medico had advised him to take up a hobby—‘preparing for retirement,’ he called it. Orchids were one of the suggestions. The doctor should have known that my uncle was incapable of doing anything by halves. Orchids became a consuming passion. Retiring years before he was expected to (actually shaking the F. T. Share Index), the relative devoted himself to his new pursuit. He embraced orchidomania as fervently as a religion. New horizons opened up. He had hoped one day to cultivate ... Had I read Wells’s ‘Flowering of the Strange Orchid’? A pity that one had eluded him, because orchids now commanded less of his time. He reached beyond orchids ...

“We left the orchid house. The orchid house was not locked. Making a detour through the kitchen, we picked up a basinful of mince, a slice or two of steak, and a couple of bones. There was a mortice lock on the door of the next hothouse.

“Thin brown fingers clutching the key, my uncle swore me to secrecy. I made

some feeble joke, but pandered to his whims. Even then, before opening the door, he delivered a mini-lecture on his current obsession—the thin line between plant and animal life. The man-eating vine was a commonplace of horror stories—well, there *was* an area where fantasy fiction merged with fantastic fact.

“The plants nearest the door were almost commonplace—if giant fly-traps and sundews can be counted as commonplace. We fed these with pinches of mince. I was even allowed the treat of sprinkling meat onto waiting flowers. I admit I found their reaction grimly fascinating, with some blooms snapping shut on dinner, and others curling tendrils over their morsels of protein. Uncle enjoyed himself almost as much as the plants.

“The larger specimens were more impressive. They were approached with a certain reverence. You have to accord respect to any vegetation that can make a meal of half a pound of steak. I wasn’t allowed to feed these. Nor did I wish to. I felt that, unless approached with care, one of them might snap off a finger as an hors d’oeuvre.

“Something crawled towards my neck, and I put a cautious hand up to it. It was no more than a trickle of sweat. The temperature and humidity in the glasshouse were uncomfortably high. Uncle grinned as he noticed the gesture, but he didn’t comment. Instead he continued his exposition on South American discoveries, coupled with research into hybrids, grafting, cross-fertilisation, and so on, all mixed up with a poly-syllabic jargon that bemused me completely.

“Although I couldn’t understand what he was talking about, I could see what he was doing. We ended by confronting an unhealthy-looking mass with blotched saucer-like leaves—or were they blooms? By this time most of the meat had been consumed, the other plants devoted to the process of digestion. Uncle had only bloody bones left in his tuck box. Were they for this mottled monster? Of course they were.

“I believe the thing was quivering with expectation. It practically grabbed at the hunks of skin and bone, my uncle musing meanwhile on whether the thing was capable of consuming a man. Not whole, he concluded, answering his own queries. A man would have to be chopped up first, and that hardly counted. However, his researches were continuing. He had entered an area of delicate and fascinating speculation. Was the question now one of cultivation or of breeding? Was conception the dividing line between animal and vegetable? Could that line be crossed?

“One of the saucers opened with a plop and a nauseating reek of gas. I’ll swear it burped. Uncle suggested that I had seen enough for one day. I agreed with him—my shirt was sticking to my back, and my soggy condition had nothing to do with either the temperature or the humidity.

“Outside in the sunshine Elaine was tanning prettily. She purred contentedly as I rubbed oil between her shoulder blades. But Uncle’s references to breeding had touched me on a sore spot. The fact is—Elaine and I had experienced some difficulty in that department. It seemed that I couldn’t and she didn’t want to. At least, not often. I don’t know whether I couldn’t because she didn’t want to, or whether she didn’t want to because I couldn’t. As a sex-symbol, Elaine was all symbol and no sex. None of which had escaped Uncle’s beady eye.

“In fact at meal times—the only occasions on which the three of us seemed to come together—he would slip into the conversation occasional innuendos or half-jokes, meant to be funny because accompanied by a wrinkled grimace, but which I considered in rather poor taste. Naturally I didn’t wince as I felt inclined, because a poor relation learns to laugh at the right time. Well, I suppose the old devil eventually did us a good turn.

“After a particularly good dinner—I can’t recall what we ate, but the claret was remarkable—Uncle had been holding forth on his monomania. As a dutiful nephew I displayed some interest, and Elaine bestowed the occasional slow, sweet smile. Elaine has never been a great wit—being too involved with her private thoughts to follow much conversation—but her smile has warmed the cockles of many a monologuist’s heart. She and I toyed relaxedly with our brandy snifters, content to let Uncle sparkle like the soda-water in his glass.

“On this occasion the bubbles must have gone to his head, because he prattled of his great experiment. At first I took this to mean the bone-crunching monster locked up in the hot-house but gradually came to realise that he was referring to some holy of holies. Apparently under the house lay unsuspected cellars, and he was offering to show us all. Elaine and I floated after him on an alcoholic cloud of euphoria.

“The cellar door was a cunningly devised panel in the kitchen. At the bottom of the stairs were doors to right and left. Behind the right-hand door lay the wine racks in an electronically controlled atmosphere at exactly the right temperature and humidity to keep their precious contents in condition.

“The same principle applied to the room behind the left-hand door, except that here conditions were equatorial. Within minutes of the door being shut behind us, our pores had opened like faucets, sweat running into our eyes. Even with vision somewhat blurred, though, we could not miss the vine that half-filled the cellar. The plant was supported by a frame of hausers, to which it clung with rope-like tendrils.

“As Uncle lectured on instinctive reactions in plants he held out a finger, and a green thread obligingly curled around it. A pretty demonstration. While we were admiring this performance I leaned unsteadily against the frame, whereupon

something gripped me around the waist in a wrestler's hold, jerking me off my feet and among the dripping leaves.

"Uncle gently unwound the slippery bonds, ducking words like 'naughty, naughty'; though I could not be sure whether they applied to me, or to the vine.

"Cautiously standing back, we were invited to admire the buds that festooned the branches—green fingers varying in size, with the largest a handspan in length and over an inch in diameter. Streaks of red showed through a tracery of cracks near the top of one bud that was ready to open.

"Subdued excitement gripped Uncle. He knew what to expect. He stared at the bud, biting his lip and breathing heavily. On cue, while we watched, the bud burst open. Later I wondered if the fact that we were there may have had something to do with this prompt exhibition. After all the movement of the tendrils had shown that the plant reacted to our presence. Even if we had been obliged to wait, though, we would have been rewarded by the display. The flower was remarkable.

"A bright, shining red, it parodied my inefficient reproductive equipment—the main difference being its rampant vigour compared with my habitual ineptitude. No wonder it had been kept behind locked doors: its appearance in a shop window might have exposed a florist to prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act.

"Elaine has a delicate mind. Easily offended by schoolboy smut, she switches off completely at an off-colour remark. I glanced sideways, expecting blushes at one of Nature's jokes. In that heat a blush was difficult to detect, but her eyes had opened very wide and her mouth hung open. For the space of a few heartbeats nothing existed in her world but that flower. She looked so peculiarly vulnerable that something stirred deep inside me—a chemical reaction with pity and jealousy fizzing together. I wanted to take her in my arms and console her for what she had been missing—at the same time realising, almost with fury, that in her present mood she would be easy game for anyone offering as much.

"The show was not yet over. My uncle giggled as he tapped the stem of the flower. It bounced backwards and forwards suggestively; and before quivering to a stop, it exuded a few drops of viscous honeydew with a heady perfume.

"I can't describe the scent, only its effect—more potent than any combination of claret and brandy. Elaine felt it too: the melting ice-maiden turned to me moist-lipped. Her hair was streaming. Perspiration and the atmosphere had drenched her clothes until they clung to every curve. She was making little animal noises.

"Dizzy with the perfume, I grabbed her and she clung to me. Murmuring incoherent excuses to my uncle we lunged from the cellar. I dimly remember

him holding the cellar doors open for us, and his laughter cackling behind us. We left a trail of scattered garments all the way up the stairs to our bedroom. From then on we threshed about in an ecstatic frenzy until first light, when sheer exhaustion brought us down to earth and we crashed into sleep."

Harry fell silent, savouring his drink and perhaps the memory. We could hear the midwife purposefully busy. Harry gestured vaguely in her direction with his glass, as though emphasising the link between the drama in the next room and the bedroom farce some nine months past.

"Good for Uncle's potted plants," I murmured, quickly refilling my glass before the bottle was quite empty. Between the glow of the fire, the sighing of the wind, and Harry's reminiscent drawl, I was losing a battle against lethargy.

Another cry from Elaine. I sat up with an expletive, and with one stride Harry was over to the door. It opened as he reached it. The freckled midwife, firm of bosom and bicep, shook her head.

"Early yet," she hooted. "Back to your bottle and dinna' fash yourself. I promise ye'll be the first tae ken when the bairn appears."

She disappeared, shutting the bedroom door with the speed and efficiency of a cuckoo returning to its clock.

Harry ambled back to his chair, nursed his empty glass for a minute, then began to talk again. It passed the time.

"That wasn't the only occasion," he went on. "She'd come panting to bed, eager as a wild colt for a gallop, and I'd know it had been blossom-time again. Luckily some of that perfume seemed to cling to her. Her fingers would be covered with red pollen. One sniff, and I'd be bucking like a bronco. At first, after these bouts we'd go back to our old sterile ways, but gradually we began to grow towards each other. Nothing madly shattering, of course, but at least giving us a new interest in life. I'm more grateful to Uncle for that than for his thousands."

More silence from Harry.

"A sudden bereavement?" I hazarded.

He sighed, as Adam might have sighed, looking back on lost Paradise.

"It was the onion seller," he said simply.

I waited for what must follow.

"Uncle was undisturbable down in the cellar, and Elaine was soaking up the ultra-violet, when the onion seller appeared at the kitchen door. He was a slight man, kippered by wind and sun. Little black eyes had taken in every item of kitchen equipment between his question and my reply. In point of fact, he only seemed to know one word, which was 'onions'—an easy one, because it's almost the same in French as in English. I replied, 'Non'—showing off a bit—

waving a hand at the deep-freeze, the micro-wave oven, and the washing-up machine, conveying the information that food in these parts was practically untouched by human hand. We just didn't need such items as old-fashioned onions. So off he trundled, bundles of onions swinging from his shoulders.

"He had a poor sense of direction because, instead of turning towards the front gate, he headed for the greenhouses. I had to swivel him round and point him in the direction he ought to go. He paused before going on to his next customer, and looked back at the house—not casually as one does at a gate, but intently as though searching for something which ought to have been there that he'd missed.

"I remember telling myself that the poor bastard wasn't going to do much business in this area, with at least two miles between us and the next house. Then I went on to consider he must have been pretty stupid, because even an unlettered clod must have seen there were no other houses down this lane, and no houses meant no sales. Finally I recalled that I hadn't seen an onion seller for years. He was an anachronism, like a muffin man ringing his bell around Earl's Court.

"By way of pleasantries I mentioned this to Uncle half-way through dinner that evening. He didn't find my joke very funny. In fact, it put him off his food. He set down his knife and fork very precisely, cogitated for a count of forty, then fired a stream of questions at me like an interrogating commissar.

"He wanted to be told exactly what the man had looked like, exactly what he had said, every detail of time, place, and scenario until he knew as much about the encounter as if he'd been there. When all that information had been gathered in, he pushed abruptly from the table, and whisked from the room without waiting for coffee, muttering something that sounded like 'Now, now, now.' He spent the rest of the night down in the cellar.

"He surfaced half-way through the following morning, just as I was massaging sun-tan oil into that awkward spot halfway up Elaine's spine. He wanted her assistance with a tricky process below-stairs. Knowing Elaine's limitations whenever anything practical is involved, I offered my services but was brushed aside. Uncle wanted Elaine and Elaine alone. I fastened her halter top and retired gracefully.

"My meditations were interrupted by the return of the onion seller; this time without the pretence of onions. In the twenty-four hours since our last encounter his vocabulary had improved remarkably. He still had a marked foreign accent but expressed himself forcefully. Making enquiries in the neighbourhood, he had been informed that an old gentleman lived alone on these premises. Encountering me yesterday, he had assumed he must have taken a wrong turn.

However, a conversation last night with a taxi-driver convinced him that he had been right first time. He wanted my uncle. What's more, the expression on his face and the tone of his voice did not encourage me to call for the old man.

“Fortunately the cellar door was closed, and the stranger's darting glances failed to spot the vital panel. However, my formal reply that Uncle was not at home to callers was clearly not believed. The bright black eyes came to rest almost lovingly on a gleaming butcher's cleaver hanging with other equipment on the kitchen wall. I don't know why it was there: I'd never seen it in action. The foreigner, though, was obviously considering a use for it.

“Suddenly he changed his tactics. With a smile, intended to be warm and friendly, he promised m'sieur that if m'sieur knew everything m'sieur would understand everything, and if the worse came to worst, perhaps even forgive everything. It was a long story, but I did not interrupt because while the chap was talking; he was not molesting Uncle. My main fear was that Uncle himself might come popping out in the middle of the narrative. Luckily he didn't.

“It seemed that, in his own village, the onion seller once had a son—black hair, black eyes, and a lithe body brown as a nut. In the boy's thirteenth year an old man had come to live nearby. This old man was rich enough to indulge his hobby of raising peculiar plants. Some of these could only have been conceived by the Devil, but the boy was fascinated. As months passed, he began to spend all his spare time in the hellish garden created by the Englishman. He was occasionally paid for doing odd jobs—not overpaid, because the very rich understand the value of money, but money changed hands.

“Because of the money rumours started, but there was no truth in those stories. Truly those two were not interested in each other but only in the loathsome specimens. The boy was warned to stay away, but he defied authority, even enduring beatings.

“There came a time when the boy did not come home at all. His father went up to the house of the crazy plants, intent on a reckoning. The old man had suddenly decamped. The boy was there, though.

“The stranger's voice was flat and unemotional as he described how the young body had been found tangled with a vine. Quite dead, of course. What else could have been expected? After being impaled. Did m'sieur understand? A great shoot of the plant had been thrust up inside the victim. Tendrils of the vine had held him fast while he perished in agonies—that Thing inside him.

“The man could spin a yarn. I slumped back on the kitchen stool as he helped himself to the cleaver. After that I was quick to take evasive action, putting the length of a table between myself and that shining steelware. I fancy I babbled something about not being responsible for my relation's misdeeds. However, the

cleaver was not required for immediate bloodletting. Only for breaking the windows of accursed greenhouses.

“I didn’t try to stop him. After all, glass is replaceable—I am not. A minute or so later I heard a crashing and tinkling like a mad comedy act.

“My next inclination was to brief Uncle on these developments. It says something for the intruder’s narrative powers that, until I opened the cellar door, all my attention had been focussed on the poor devil’s sufferings. Only when I stood at the top of the stairs did I begin to put two and two together. I didn’t like the total. Uncle was down there with Elaine—and the vine. I was soon down there too. Quicker than I had intended, because I missed my footing and bounced half the way. But I didn’t feel the bruises. Scrambling to my feet I crashed open the double door. Thank heavens, the old devil had been so sure of my behaving myself he hadn’t troubled to lock it

“The first thing to hit me was the perfume, now so concentrated it had passed beyond sweetness into a stink. The vine, covered with red blooms, might have been dripping blood. Elaine was spread-eagled over it, tendril binding her body in a Saint Andrew’s cross. Her head drooped. She was unconscious.

“I hurtled over to her and tried to pull her free. Uncle did his feeble best to stop me, but I sent him spinning with a well-aimed if unsporting kick to the groin. He needn’t have bothered because, before I realized what was happening, the vine had got me too and I was struggling with a thick green coil around my middle.

“Uncle and I screamed obscenities at each other. I won that round on points, because in barbed phrases I described what was happening upstairs to the rest of his collection. He howled like a creature possessed and fled, leaving me to wrestle on.

“The plant had an unfair advantage. I had only two arms and two legs, whereas it seemed to produce fresh thongs at will. My resistance grew weaker as it bound me firmly to itself. Was all that an inbuilt natural reaction, or did it have a mind of its own?

“I lost count of time but eventually felt a cool draught on my face and realised that the heavy scent was drifting away. In his hurry Uncle had left both doors open. The grip of one of the tendrils relaxed and I was able to free a hand. Slowly I disengaged myself. I don’t know whether the sudden drop in temperature was affecting the plant, or whether, having done what it was intended to do, it would have died anyway.

“Once I had disentangled myself, I released Elaine. As I lowered her to the cellar floor, her eyelids fluttered. At least she was still alive.

“Filled with hot fury against the monsters that had treated her with this

indignity, I fell upon the vine, tearing great bunches of flowers from it. By now it was a defenceless object, visibly wilting, and eventually I realised that I would be better employed in rendering my uncle limb from limb.

“It says something for the incoherence of my reasoning that I left Elaine lying there while I surfaced, calling down damnation on that gibbering little ape.

“I found parts of him in the ruins of the carnivores’ hothouse. The onion seller had fed the rest to various plants. On seeing me, the boy’s father smiled, bowed, and walked away. The police caught up with him on the outskirts of Poole. Indisputably insane, he was never brought to trial.

“None of the plants survived. A chap from the botanical gardens at Kew was quite cut up about that. Not as cut up as Uncle, of course. Fortunately there was enough left of him for identification and a respectable funeral ...”

Silence again, except for the wind and the snow.

“Is that all?” I asked after a while.

“I don’t know,” replied Harry. “You see, when I’d calmed down somewhat, and had Elaine properly sedated and tucked up in bed, something was found.”

“Something?” I prompted after another long silence.

“Where Elaine had been lying. A long, limp, dirty-brown object. Rather like a flabby bean pod, only it had never had beans in it.”

“What was it?”

Harry took a deep breath and was about to answer when he stopped.

In the next room the midwife had started to scream.

LUNA by G.W. Perriwils

G.W. Perriwils is actually two people, being the pseudonym used for collaborations between Huntsville, Alabama writers, Georgette Perry and William J. Wilson.

Born in 1930, Georgette Perry has lived in Alabama all her life. She writes: "In 1971, after eighteen years in a chemistry lab, I dropped out and became a middle-aged hippie. I've had poetry in many literary magazines but except for a few confession stories, 'Luna' was my first fiction."

William J. Wilson, whom Perry describes as "the right-brained half of G.W. Perriwils," was born in 1929 and grew up in Memphis, Tennessee. Since 1960 Wilson has lived in Huntsville, participating actively in NASA's quest for the moon. A computer scientist by profession, he has written light and serious verse as well as fantasy and science fiction.

G.W. Perriwils' most recent story, "Bedlam V" in Owlflight, deals with mad life forms sequestered to safe houses scattered through the galaxy. It struck me while reading "Luna" that not too many years ago this story would have been considered science fiction as well as fantasy. Instead, it is fantasy within a contemporary framework, and proof that a high tech society is no barrier to the supernatural.

Edward Kossum did not know he was dreaming. The landscape of his dream was as real as any he'd ever seen. It was deep night. He stood alone in a dense forest. Overhead, branches of oaks, firs, poplars wove a black canopy. Through breaks in the trees he could see remote mountain slopes bathed in the brilliance of a full moon. The chill mountain air stung his nostrils with aromatic forest odors. He breathed deeply, almost gasping, wincing from the painful whiteness of the distant peaks and drawing back into his dark covert as if to quell some undefined fear. Far off, barely pricking the silence, a sound began—the baying of hounds ...

With a start Kossum wrenched free of the dream, his heart pounding. He lay crosswise on the bed as if flung that way, his damp face pressed against the rumpled sheet. Reality came shakily into focus as he remembered the pad and pencil on his bedside table and Dr. Alton's admonition.

In Dr. Alton's cool presence Kossum felt somehow disheveled and clumsy, as if he had stumbled in by accident. The psychiatrist, dark-eyed and bearded, was slightly theatrical in appearance, in contrast to his highly restrained manner. Slowly he perused the dream record.

"We have a little more to work on this time," he said, looking up at Kossum. He spoke in a precise, emotionless voice that admitted of no interpretation. The forest dream is basically the same one you reported last time. This time we have more details."

"I never used to dream at all," said Kossum.

"That's really not true. Everyone dreams. The sleep researchers, Dement and the others, have never yet found a subject who doesn't dream. Some people just forget very quickly. By the time they're fully awake, they can't remember a thing."

"I—I hate to dream," said Kossum.

"On the moon flight, do you remember having any dreams?"

"I don't think so," Kossum said slowly, envisioning the moon, its bright surface looming in the viewport on their approach. A troubling thought, a wisp of dream or false memory, hovered on the periphery of awareness. He saw the nude figure of a lovely woman, her hair drawn back in classic style. Her face, turning toward him, grew cold with anger. But he wasn't sure. "I don't remember any dreams," he said.

"What about earlier in your life?"

"Nothing. Even when I first came to you, I thought I was just having trouble sleeping—you know, night sweats, palpitations, all the rest. I didn't really know what was going on. Now that I do know, I wish I didn't. If I could just take something to blank the dreams out—"

"I don't think that would be wise now. You're getting in touch with a part of yourself that's been suppressed. We can learn a great deal from it."

"But it's the same dream over and over," Kossum said with irritation. "It's happened twice more. I quit writing it down because each time it's the same thing. I'm in the forest at the foot of the mountain, scared as hell. The last time it lasted longer. When I heard the dogs barking I started to run. I ran for miles, and the dogs were gradually gaining. I knew they were after me. The terrain was wild, thickets and gullies and streams, almost impassable. When I realized there was no escape, that's when I woke up."

Dr. Alton watched him thoughtfully. "What do the feelings of the dream mean to you?"

"Being helpless, afraid ... nowhere to hide."

"To be hounded and hunted—that doesn't fit your image of yourself." Dr.

Alton's puzzled words hung in the air like a question. After a moment he continued, "You're human like the rest of us, Kossum, even though everyone knows you as the hero, the perfect man. They remember how you handled the thruster malfunction when you were coming off the moon. I've listened to the tapes and read your medical file from NASA. O'Shea was coming apart, but you were cold as ice."

"We were trained for things like that, simulations of damn near everything."

"Kossum, the odds against success that particular time were overwhelming, but you managed to recover the rendezvous with the command module. Two seconds either way and—" Dr. Alton cut himself off. "But you made it back, and so did O'Shea."

"Put it down to the will to live."

"That alone doesn't guarantee performance in a crisis. In a real crunch many people have total paralysis of nerve."

Kossum grunted impatiently. He felt embarrassed and irritated.

"My point is, Kossum, underneath that superb functioning you had the same emotions any panic-stricken tyro would have, the same that poor O'Shea felt and couldn't control. You've kept all that pushed out of sight. This may be what you have to deal with now in your dreams."

"I'm not sure," said Kossum wearily. Dr. Alton began to straighten the books on his desk, a signal that it was time for the session to end. Kossum stood up and moved heavily toward the door. He couldn't put his doubts into proper words. It certainly wasn't a reluctance to admit having moments of fear—that wasn't what was torturing him. It was the intensity of the recurring dreams; each time they left him more shaken. More and more it seemed as if they were devouring his life, becoming more real than the actual world. Even now he felt like a sleepwalker as he forced himself to concentrate on Dr. Alton's anonymous voice dismissing him and confirming the next visit. As he left, the room seemed shadowy and indistinct, as if the afternoon had clouded over.

The Friday night crowd jostled noisily at the Fat Cat. At a corner table Kossum sipped his second screwdriver. The murky gloom where he now existed was only deepened by the vodka and Valium. Kossum peered distantly at the figures on the dance floor, feeling no more than a groggy nostalgia; he was hopelessly removed from the good times of these strangers.

At a nearby table the lead guitarist's dark-haired girlfriend chatted with another girl. He listened idly, catching a word now and then. The second girl was a tawny blonde, sun-streaked. *Pure California*, he thought. Her halter top revealed a smooth rosy tan and her smile was slow and rich, her manner relaxed

and generous. Through the friendly din of the Fat Cat, Kossum strained to hear their voices. "Sarah," the brunette called her friend.

When the guitarist finished his set and led his dark girl out to the dance floor, Kossum strolled over.

"Sarah, let me buy you a drink."

Her eyes were brown and calm, looking up first in mild surprise, then in bubbling amusement "I think I recognize you," she said with a guilty little laugh.

Kossum laughed with her and took the empty chair. "I think I recognize you too, Sarah," he said, and indeed it all seemed very familiar. He had grown accustomed to a stream of willing bodies, the bold ones who pushed themselves into his arms at cocktail parties and kissed him for luck, and the others, the timid knocks at the motel door and the awkward explanations.

The music pounded into Kossum like an alien heartbeat. Under his ribs he felt the warmth of the liquor rising. Sarah's face was welcoming, her lazy smile tender and inviting. He felt her golden body tugging at him like the earth's gravity drawing home an errant satellite.

The night was gusty and smelled of rain. The rickety outside stairs to Sarah's garage apartment shivered under their footsteps as they climbed up. Back toward Houston, neon reflections stained the low overcast in pale greens and pinks. The world seemed folded in mysterious colored darkness. Kossum tried to shake off a recurring sense of unreality and flight, but some deeper awareness could not be quieted. *Even now I'm running*, he thought to himself, *trying to hide*.

He stood close to Sarah, his hand on her bare midriff as she fished out her key. The lamp she snapped on inside gave a dim amber glow, and she lit candles in colored wells. Overhead the eaves sloped together and the candlelight flickered on zodiac posters tacked to the slanting walls, on fringed magenta cushions and an India print on Sarah's tumbled bed.

Almost as tall as Kossum, she moved easily into his embrace, her body a lithe delight under the thin cottons of her halter and wrap skirt. He tasted her rich winy mouth and breathed the scent of her skin. When she broke away from his kisses, it was only to murmur endearments. "I've thought of you so many times and never knew I'd be with you ..." Her voice was breathy with excitement.

The halter was tied in back. With one hand Kossum deftly loosened the knot and drew it away from her body, freeing her breasts. She unsnapped the skirt, letting it slip down, and stood in her light panties.

"Oh, Sarah, lovely ... lovely ..."

Her tawny body was warm and tropical, giving back days in the sun. It trembled eagerly at his touch.

"I thought I wouldn't come back to you—" he said, his voice strangled and intense. He knew his words were incongruous, but she accepted them without surprise. He had a wild need to tell her everything, how at that moment she was the haven he sought in desperate flight from the menacing dream. Against the soft edges of Sarah's world of drifting colors, perfume, night wind, another reality hovered in the distance, etched in black and stark white light. He turned away from it, following her glimmering flesh.

For a long time they lay loosely in each other's arms in the murmuring shallows of spent delight. Sarah sighed and lightly stroked his chest.

"Your body is so beautiful ..." Her voice was soft and sleepy. Her wandering hand traced down his thigh and paused curiously, exploring a strange roughness of his skin. "How did you hurt yourself?" she asked. "Look at those scratches."

Kossum shivered with eerie disorientation. *I don't want to remember*, he thought in panic, but the memory forced itself upon him. *Running, the hounds' exultant baying close behind, dark thickets looming ahead, staggering, falling, thorns ripping at his thighs ...*

It can't be real, he told himself in desolate wonder. To Sarah he muttered stupidly, "I was in the woods at night, didn't know where I was—"

"Little boy lost in the woods," she said lightly, but her eyes betrayed a deeper concern.

He looked away. Above, on the slanting eaves, the candles cast shifting splashes of color on the zodiac posters. Kossum's gaze traced out the hieratic figures, a crab beneath a crescent moon, a girl with a sheaf of wheat, a centaur with a bow.

"You go in for this astrology stuff?"

"Sure."

"Tell me something about it."

"I'm earth ... I think you're fire."

"December third. Sagittarius."

"I was right. That's a fire sign—the Archer. And you've aimed very high."

Kossum concentrated on her voice and the comforting odor of her skin. She spoke in little rushes of words, a kind of music. "Your aura is so strange. I'm sensitive to things like that. It's like you're in some kind of danger or something. Someone is very angry, for something you didn't even mean to do. Maybe I can cast a horoscope for you, help you in some way—"

"Baby, I wish you could."

It was hard to believe the change in Kossum. Dr. Alton kept his usual guarded composure, but he noted Kossum's shambling gait as the man entered the office.

His glance quickly took in the stubbled face and the bloodshot eyes that flickered with anxiety.

“What’s going on, Kossum?” he asked with a faint touch of camaraderie.

“It’s bad. Really bad. I don’t know how much more I can stand.”

“The dreams?”

“*The dream.* It’s every night now. I’m afraid to go to sleep. And the marks, the crazy damned ... after effects.” Kossum’s eyes were almost pleading. There were now marks on his arms.

Dr. Alton glanced at the folder on his desk. The appearance of hysterical symptoms had definitely changed the nature of the case. Kossum might be close to a real breakdown. Hospitalization? He hesitated. A trace of hero worship made him want Kossum to fight his way back to normal on his own.

“I don’t know what’s real any longer. Everything I used to believe ... Nothing holds.”

“You don’t have to doubt your reason because of psychosomatic effects. These things happen all the time—the man with the ulcer, the kid whose wart disappears when he rubs an egg against it and buries the egg. Your symptoms are just more dramatic.”

“But you don’t know how bad it is,” Kossum said. “When I dream now I can hardly wake up or come back from ... from that place. And then its marks are on me. I know the dream isn’t real, but they *make* it real.”

“Your emotions are real, Kossum. Have you ever heard of the stigmata, the bleeding wounds of the crucifixion that appear on the bodies of mystics? We don’t know how the body does these things, but they’ve been documented many times.”

“I want you to try something different, Kossum,” said Dr. Alton, after a pause. “A very simple procedure, based on autosuggestion, has worked in many cases of obsessive dreams. It’s a way to extend the control of the waking mind into the dream world. Each night before you go to bed, practice the relaxation exercises I’ve shown you. After you unwind a little, tell yourself very strongly, *Whatever it is in the dream, pursuing me, I will stand and face it.*”

For the first time in the session, Kossum’s haunted eyes showed a spark of interest. “It would be a relief—whatever happens—to know the end of it.”

“Try it then. There’s a chance the autosuggestion will give you a breakthrough.”

He ran. For miles and miles, in the full moon’s light and shadow, through the same ragged terrain. Branches whipped his face. The rocky slopes crumbled and slipped underfoot. His muscles knotted with agony, and the chill air seared his

heaving lungs like fire. The triumphant din of the dogs was close behind. He fled with the desperation of the hunted animal. He had no name, no history. He was no longer Kossum.

Yet even in headlong flight, some part of his being steeled itself for defiance. Rage filled him, the courage of the cornered. In sudden fierceness he wheeled and faced the yelping pack. They stopped, then surged around him, circling and leaping. The brilliant moonlight glittered on their furious eyes and slavering jaws. Behind them pale, shadowy figures hastened forward. He knew they would not help him. *She* had sent them—the ones who welcomed no heroes, who harried him through endless dreams. For an instant he glimpsed her again. Dazzled by her radiant body, he raised his eyes to her face. Implacable. *You have no pity*, he thought in despair.

From the circling pack, a snarling hound sprang, clamping its teeth on his shoulder. He flung it aside, but another was upon him in an instant, then another. They bore him down. As he went to his knees, he felt a slash at his throat and heard youthful voices urging on the dogs. “Theron! Lelaps! Pamphagus!”

In their archaic accents there was no malice. They shouted with the joy of the hunt, their quarry finally brought to earth.

MIND by Les Freeman

“Mind” is only Les Freeman’s second published short story, although he is no stranger to print. Born in May of 1939 and currently living in London, Freeman is a career journalist of some twenty years experience, contributing to such papers as the Daily Express, the Birmingham Post, and The Northern Echo. Freeman is also a poet, a Fellow of the International Poetry Society, and the editor of Water. In addition, he is a playwright, having written more than a dozen plays, some of which have been staged, others which have run into problems, as Freeman explains: “In addition to having a play banned by the theatre that awarded it first prize in a competition, the most recent thing to happen to me play-wise is that after having a full length play accepted for production in London it was promptly banned by the theatre management (this play dealt with the IRA and management thought they could end up with a bomb in their offices or auditorium if the IRA did not like the theme of the play!).”

The Yorkshire town of Whitby is the setting for “Mind.” Horror fans will recall that Dracula once paid a visit to this seaside town. “Mind,” however, is not a story about gothic vampires.

For the majority of the year there was something special about Whitby, as far as Derek Benzie was concerned. It wasn’t simply that the little fishing town looked majestic and steeped in history; it was the fact that it *felt* majestic and it *was* steeped in history.

On sharp icy days in December, when there was the threat of rain or snow, Derek would climb the one hundred and ninety-nine steps that led from the older part of the town up the steep cliff to the parish church and the ruins of Whitby Abbey. Once there, he could revisit the site of the old religious community, wander in the mystery of lost history, throw the old copper coin—with a prayer to God or the devil—down the bottomless well that stood a few yards from the nave, before retreating to the shade of the still-used parish church to stare out to sea in the hope of spotting a storm arriving, or to watch snow clouds or snow storms battle their way across the bay and then shower the seafront with foam.

In the crispness of April he would wander through the shadows of the main street—only three or four yards wide—admire the stones that made up the old, stately, houses of Bagdale; take special note of the daffodils that held on to life

in the old gardens that bordered the town centre; explore the eccentric museum and art gallery with the dull rays of the sun helping to illuminate exhibits; and then enjoy a fish lunch at the Angel hotel safe in the knowledge that, despite cod wars and fishing limits, that particular meat of the sea was good and fresh.

On the hot, claustrophobic days of August when Whitby changed itself from a town that traded with the sea into a town that took money from day trippers and holiday-makers, Derek rushed through the day with the speed of a young man frightened of growing old. He called on his clients—the few stores in the town prepared to sell expensive French silk clothing—and rushed out again to the more lucrative towns of Harrogate and Scarborough. There may be more money in those two towns, he told himself every August but in Whitby, when it was not overflowing with trippers, there was much more character.

He had been visiting Whitby and the rest of north Yorkshire for almost ten years, since he had gained an exclusive agency and had been determined to make it a success. And he had. There had been no question of him being replaced as long as his order book looked healthy, and, as the number of French silk dresses that turned up for official functions in the area testified, the health of that order book seemed assured.

Derek enjoyed his job. It meant that he saw some of the most beautiful countryside in England as he motored through the vast, almost unspoilt North Yorks Moors National Park, getting simple enjoyment from reading place names as varied and as unusual as Seave Green, Spauntan Moor, Rosedale Abbey, Goathland and Ugglebarnaby. But as much as he liked the sights and the sounds of the open countryside, his trips to Whitby, when they were out of season, were the highlights of his year. York and Harrogate, Middlesbrough and Scarborough may provide more orders; Whitby supplied more enjoyment.

It was December. So his Whitby visit was going to be something to enjoy. There was one major drawback—he had to get there and back by train. His car was out of action and the garage held out little hope of it being roadworthy within a week. But Whitby was a small town; and one of its main attractions was that it was best seen on foot. So a train journey was not going to spoil the trip.

The train from Middlesbrough to Whitby was a pay-train; a green-backed diesel that snaked its way through the national parkland calling at thirteen or fourteen village stops before arriving at the sea more than an hour after starting its journey. His car could have done it in less time but, he told himself, by train it was more relaxing.

He arrived at Whitby in mid-morning; called on four shops and took four major orders; lunched on prawns and braised plaice and prepared to spend a couple of hours wandering and watching before catching the train home. It was

cold and it was grey. There was a heavy sky that indicated to the knowing that snow wasn't far away. He tucked his scarf tighter inside the neck of his leather overcoat, and with briefcase wedged between his waist and his arm, sunk his hands deep into his pockets.

He glanced with little interest at the dusty antiques that stared out at him from windows of shops that were closed to customers until the summer; paid little attention to the other odd shops that offered products of Whitby's traditional jet industry. Instead he hurried along the twisting streets before climbing the one hundred and ninety-nine steps that led to the abbey. At the top of the cliff he stopped for breath. The silhouette of the abbey ruins greeted him; black and big and brooding. He paid his entrance fee at the gate and strode into the abbey grounds as the first flake of snow fell and melted on the old stonework. It was cold. Very cold.

He stared up at the imposing, but empty, windows that had once-risen in coloured splendour at the back of the altar, and he marvelled at the natural window pane of snowflakes that filled the empty spaces. It was as though someone had flicked flakes between glass in double-glazed windows and held the snow there forever, moving in motion with the wind and the season. As Derek stared at the snow he saw that it was falling, actually falling and reaching the ground, only outside the walls of the abbey. There was no roof to protect the building and although he could look up and see the snow above him none reached the grass that made up the floor of the abbey. And while the grass outside the building was old and wiry and a dull dark green, the grass within the walls of the building was fresh and bright like grass in meadows at summertime. He shook his head to make sure he was still thinking straight, decided it was all due to the fact that the abbey's walls sheltered the interior of the old building, and marched out to the edge of the cliff to look at the sea.

The snow, however, was falling so heavily that it formed a thick blanket between him and the view. His hair was soon covered with whiteness while flakes that hit his coat were melting and sliding to the ground as water. He checked the time by the parish church clock and decided to head for the station, to miss his regular ritual of a monetary sacrifice to the abbey's well, but to give himself time to walk through the ruins again on his way back to the gate. He turned for a final view of the storm through the vast altar windows and saw that the snow was now falling on both sides of them and he was leaving a trail of footprints in the snow that covered the aisle of the old nave.

The train was at the platform when he arrived at the railway station and, after buying an evening newspaper he joined the train. He settled comfortably into the warmth of a nonsmoking compartment and opened his newspaper. He couldn't

read it, however, because of the shadows cast by the station roof. So he folded the paper and slotted it between himself and the side of the train, leaned back in the seat, and closed his eyes.

He didn't notice the tram's engine start, and he didn't feel the train edge out roughly over the poor connections at the entrance to the station. He opened his eyes as the station was disappearing round a bend and the train was set straight for its last journey of the day.

Derek looked at the view. It was a habit he had whenever he travelled by train. He wanted to see the detail of the houses, the sidings, the farmscapes that other people would normally miss. He wanted to spot the cracked windows in houses that looked otherwise architecturally perfect and well-maintained; he wanted to spot the stray growth of nettles or dock leaves in the cultivated gardens that backed on to the railway line; he wanted to spot the rogue rabbit or hare celebrating its freedom in fields normally reserved for barley or cabbages or corn. It wasn't the view as such that attracted him; it was the flaws in the view or the eccentricities of nature that he enjoyed.

He spotted the peeling white paint on a signal box as the train hurried by and he took particular note of the red scarf with white spots that the signalman was wearing.

Five or six minutes after leaving Whitby the train pulled into Ruswarp station. The honeysuckle that clung to the station walls was light brown and lifeless with touches of snow highlighting the line and the look of the plant which, in five or six months, would be alive again with greenery and heavy perfume and the hum of bees. The lettering on the station side needed some attention; the 'S' was slightly askew, and that would have to be straightened before the summer and the visitors returned. The train started to pull out of Ruswarp station; on the right, a tall grey flour mill that seemed to have stood on the same spot for centuries extended its shaft of shadow protectively over the village church. Both the mill and the church benefited from the sprays of snow that clung to their roofs and windowsills, making them look cleaner, their lines more defined, their design more clear cut. They stood out defiantly against the blackness of the evening sky.

The train roared over a bridge that crossed the river Esk and Derek stared down at the ripples of water. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes as he did so, and when he opened them again the train was pulling into Sleights, a small village warm and snug in a valley with rich farmland stretching up on both sides of it. The village Station Hotel backed on to the station and the hotel's garden stretched down to the platform. The garden was used by the customers when weather was good enough, and there were lupins and roses in the flowerbeds

nodding their approval to hollyhocks stretching up to mingle with the branches of the apple trees. Apples were just starting to form and there was the merry chuckle of birds gloating over the discovery of young fruit.

On the platform Derek noticed a small huddle of children and a man. The man was about thirty-five to forty and the children—three girls and a boy—ranged in age from about four to twelve years. They were all well dressed and apparently well-behaved—until the train started to pull out of the station. As it did so, the youngest of the children, a little girl in a pink print dress with a white apron, exchanged her smile for a frown and screamed. The man bent down to console her but as he did so another young child—the boy—went through a similar experience and within seconds all four of them seemed to be wailing and crying and demanding the return of their mother who, Derek imagined, had boarded the train and was leaving the rest of the family behind. As he passed the family group he saw huge tears rolling down the cheeks of the little girl in pink and heard her crying out in a high-pitched voice: “Mummy, Mummy, please don’t go.” The man, presumably the father, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and Derek could read his lips as he explained that Mummy would only be away for a few days; she would be back very, very soon. But the little girl kept on crying and as the train got away from the station the cries of the children seemed to get louder rather than softer.

Derek smiled to himself as he remembered how his own two children could manage to cry at the least opportune times and, with the wailing still in his ears, he returned to his study of the details of the view: the branches in the trees; the birds on the branches; the feathers that made up the birds. He looked down and as he did so he saw the river rippling under a bridge, reflecting a blue sky. He sat upright, trying to check where the train was. And he recognised the views that heralded the approach of Sleights station. On his left was the booking hall and waiting room, over near the road was Sleights Station Hotel and at the back of the hotel was the garden alive with lupins and hollyhocks, stretching down to tempt train passengers at the platform. And there on the platform was the same small group of children and their father: four children—a young girl of about four in a pink print dress with a white apron, two sisters, a brother and their father. They were waving and kissing goodbye to a lady leaning from the doorway just ahead of him and as the train pulled away from the station there would be screaming, Derek told himself. The little girl would scream and then the rest would scream as well. He was right. There was a sudden wailing and weeping from the four of them as they stood on the stones of the platform; a great siren sound of crying; a great moaning that hit his eardrums like thunder; a wailing like a thousand cardinals bemoaning the death of a perfect pope.

Derek blinked and then stared hard at nothing. It was the second time he had seen the same view. The second time he had seen the same happening, from the same train. The same people. The same station. The same journey. It was impossible. Impossible for time to hiccup like that and give him a repeat performance of a ridiculous domestic scene.

He looked round to confirm his beliefs with fellow passengers, but the Whitby to Middlesbrough line is not a tremendously popular excursion in the middle of winter; there was no-one else in his no-smoking compartment. He stood up and saw there was nobody in the rest of the carriage. He slid the door of his compartment open and ambled through into the adjoining carriage in the hope of seeing the lady who was the cause of all the tears on Sleights station and to amuse her with the tricks that his brain was playing upon him. But that carriage was empty as well. He passed through it into the third and last carriage of the train; there was no-one in the second class area of the carriage and he felt his throat going dry as he looked into the first class compartment, knowing before he looked that the compartment too, was going to be empty. It was. Not even a ticket collector.

For a second or two he stood totally frozen, staring at the empty blue seats; then he turned and walked the length of the three carriages to check that he had not missed anyone. He hadn't. He sat down, trying hard to come up with a reasonable explanation and was suddenly struck by the idea that the lady in question could be at the lavatory. That would account for her not being in any of the seats; he had only looked at the seats. She could have put whatever luggage she had on a rack and then gone straight to the lavatory: hence the empty seats. Simple explanation. That was why he hadn't seen her. He would give her a couple of minutes and then take another walk down the train. It wasn't all that unusual for the train to be empty; that was one of the reasons why Dr Beeching had tried to close the line down in the early 1960s. But this was one line that had escaped the Beeching axe.

Derek leaned back in his seat with his eyes dosed as the train ground to a halt. He kept his eyes closed. For some reason he could not explain he did not want to open them to check that this station was Grosmont, the third on the line towards Middlesbrough. He kept his eyes dosed and ran over the list of orders in his mind that he had taken that morning. He thought about his lunch, about his climb up the one hundred and ninety-nine steps to the abbey; he remembered the snow that he had watched swathing the North Sea in cotton wool. He remembered the snow. The whiteness of snow. He opened his eyes and saw the garden of the Station Hotel at Sleights full of blue and crimson lupins, of lush green grass, and multicoloured hollyhocks, poppies, roses and cornflowers. And there, less than a

carriage-length away from him were the four children and their father going through the rituals of their goodbyes to their mother, to be followed by their sirens of remorse and their loud symphony of sadness. The train was pulling out; it was so soon after the goodbyes that there was not enough time for the woman to have settled her luggage and headed for the lavatory. Derek jumped from his seat and raced through the carriages, checking the seats, the signs on the lavatory doors, the luggage racks as he sped along the walkways. There was no-one there. No sign of anyone, either. No luggage; no engaged signs.

Finally he reached the first class compartment at the end of the train. He knew again that this time—like the first—it was going to be empty. It was. But as he stared at the twelve empty seats he suddenly gulped and found it difficult to breathe. The train was moving; there was scenery passing on each side of it, but there was no-one in the driver's cab. Nobody was driving the train. Nobody was guiding the train that insisted on calling at the same station time after time after time. He was the only person on the mad moving train. Then there was movement again in his body; he checked the driver's compartment a second time and then hurried back to his seat. The evening newspaper was still there, and his briefcase was exactly where he had left it. He put the newspaper inside the briefcase, strode out of the no-smoking area, and stood next to a door, fingering the catch and not totally sure of what was going to happen next. As he looked through the door window, the platform of a station came into view running alongside the door before coming to a stop as the train braked and halted. Derek cleared his throat and looked out.

It was Sleights. Again. The same pub was there, the same garden, the same station, the same four children, the same cries. The train shuddered as it prepared to leave again. Derek's hand flashed to the door. His fingers fumbled with the catch which refused to budge. He dropped his briefcase on to the floor as he did battle with the lock. Finally, growing more and more frightened, he flung himself at the door in his frenzied battle to get out. He landed with a thump on the station's cold stone platform.

"Hey, are you all right?" asked a gruff Yorkshire voice as a plump porter (the same man who acted as ticket collector—when there were any tickets to be collected—at Whitby station) bent down to check he was not hurt. "You came out of that door at a devil of a rush; it's a wonder you didn't break something. Are you sure you're all right?"

Derek stood up and straightened his coat.

"No. I'm fine," he said. "But where am I?"

"Where are yer?" repeated the porter. "Yer exactly where you were a couple of minutes ago—at Whitby."

“Whitby?”

“Where else?” asked the porter with a touch of suspicion.

Derek shrugged his shoulders and muttered that he wasn’t feeling quite himself and willingly took up an offer from the porter of a cup of tea. In the porter’s room Derek told what had happened on his train journey to Sleights.

“That’s a very odd story you’re telling,” said the porter when Derek had reached his account of his escape from the train. “Very odd.”

“Why?”

“Well, I’ll tell yer if yer really want to know.”

Derek nodded.

“Well,” said the porter, “there are three or four minutes before the train leaves, so we’re all right for time if I’m quick about it.” He pushed his empty tea mug away from him. “It was last summer ... it was very hot ... that Mrs Martin from Aislaby Great Lodge had to go off to Middlesbrough to see her mother or someone who had taken ill. It was right in the middle of the summer holidays, so all her family was at home and it meant that Mr Martin had to stay behind to look after things. He called himself a farmer, but really he just used to sit at home and tell his men what to do. A Gentleman farmer.

“Anyhow, Mrs Martin caught an early afternoon train from Sleights—it would have been the 14.14, I think. Sleights station is just below Aislaby and after seeing her off Mr Martin was taking the children to Whitby Abbey because the eldest boy was writing something about it for a school project or something ... it was all in the papers afterwards.

“Well, according to my mate at Sleights, the train arrived on time and left on time, but the children created all hell on the platform because they suddenly decided that they didn’t want Mrs Martin to leave them. When the train pulled out there was much crying and screaming and scolding and slapping before they were all quiet. When they did settle down, Mr Martin’s car is packed up with children and he pulls up the road, round over the big bridge and then up Sleights bank—it looked as though he was heading for the Guisborough to Whitby road. He could have gone through Ruswarp and up Ruswarp bank, but he didn’t.

“On Sleights bank something went wrong with the car. And the next thing my mate knows is that the screaming and crying has started all over again, but this time from nowhere. Then the car skids all the way down the hill—backwards, and hits the bridge with such a bang that it’s thrown up into the air and over into the river. All dead.”

Derek gulped.

“And Mrs Martin?”

“Well,” said the porter, “the people at the farm didn’t really know where she

was. They knew that she had gone home, but they didn't really know where home was. So it was late at night—after she had been to the theatre at Billingham—that the police finally got in touch with her and told her what had happened. And she took it very badly.

"How," asked Derek. "How badly?"

"Well," said the porter, "she never came back here again. She had to be looked after by her family and she was in such a state that she couldn't get back here for the funeral. Mr Martin's people were here, and the men from the farm, but not Mrs Martin. And after the funeral she took ill; really ill. She was so ill that she couldn't even get to Whitby for the inquest—she was represented by a solicitor. She went into hospital and she's been there ever since. Doesn't know anybody now."

"Mad?"

The porter nodded sullenly. "And according to my mate from Sleights all she keeps talking about is saying goodbye to the children on the railway station, and then she hears them screaming and screaming—someone from the Great Lodge told him that."

Derek shuddered and asked the porter about the possibility of catching a bus to Middlesbrough, but when he was told he would have to wait an hour and the journey would be much longer than by train, he decided he had been merely subjected to a bad dream, strode back on to the train, buried himself in the *Evening Gazette* (which he could read because there were lights on the train) and determined that he would forget all about the happenings at Sleights station the previous summer. There were four or five people in the carriage including an elderly lady in a black silk dress and old fur coat who was laden with shopping and who shared the nosmoking compartment with him. She smiled as he settled himself into his seat, and he threw a smile back at her plus a comment about the coldness of the weather.

Five or six minutes after leaving Whitby the train was pushing into Ruswarp station. The honeysuckle that clung to the station walls was light brown and lifeless with touches of snow highlighting the line and the look of the plant which, in five or six months, would be alive again with greenery and heavy perfume and the hum of bees. The lady in black dress and fur coat smiled her goodbyes as she gathered her bags and parcels together. Derek opened the compartment door for her, then, noticing actually how much shopping she was carrying, opened the carriage door as well and helped her out. He stood at the door for a second or two, watching her heading for the gate, and then returned to the no-smoking compartment and the shelter of his evening paper.

He checked the landmarks as they passed: the flour mill, the parish church, the

bridge, the beginning of Sleights station. As he looked up to take in a full view of the station Derek saw that the whole carriage was empty, and although he remembered the train being warm at Whitby, it had now turned cold, terribly cold. He dropped his newspaper to the floor and listened to himself breathing deeply and felt sweat forming on his brow. He knew he was afraid, and was even afraid of admitting the reason for his fear. And then he gave a long, low, hollow, bewildered moan as he saw the garden of the Station Hotel come into view: it was lush green, with summer flowers tossing their heads to a summer sky. Derek leaped to his feet, grabbing his briefcase as he did so, bounded through the compartment and tried to open the carriage door which had been so easy to open only a few minutes earlier when he was playing gentleman to the old lady in the black silk dress and old fur coat.

As he touched the door the wailing began—like all the lost souls in hell demanding the attention of man. Derek's fingers started to bleed as he fought a losing battle with the lock on the door; he scratched and clawed at the window as he tried to pull it down to give him the chance of either opening the door from the outside or of leaping out. But by then the train had started again and was pulling away, past the children and their father. This time there was something unnatural about the four youngsters: they seemed to be grotesque plastic models, nothing real at all, with glycerine tears rolling down their cheeks and recorded screams coming from their mouths. It was an awful tableau that was infinitely more frightening than four young children simply crying after someone they loved. As he drew abreast of the group, all the faces turned in his direction, pressed their plastic noses against the moving window and screamed with horror directly at him, celebrating the fear they were creating in him. He drew back and covered his eyes and the train pulled out of Sleights station.

Derek licked blood from his fingers and then slowly did a tour of the train. It was empty. No driver. No passengers. And the driver's compartment was as tightly locked as every outer door on the whole train. There was no apparent means of escape.

By the time he had finished his tour the train was pulling into Sleights station again. The screaming, which now seemed to be with him all the time, was harsher and louder and more deliberate—except for a brief spell when the train passed the group on the way out of the station, and all five of them turned to face him and, instead of crying out, they all laughed, their lips twisting into ghastly grins and grimaces as he shrank away from them.

After the train had pulled out of Sleights for the fifth or sixth or seventh time, Derek sat in his seat, cold and alone, trying to convince himself that he would eventually wake up. It was impossible, he insisted, for a human being to find

himself locked in someone else's memory: in the mind of a mad woman. Impossible, he told himself as he looked at the screeching faces for the tenth or the twentieth time. Impossible to be locked in the mind of the insane.

But was he?

Mrs Martin was discharged from hospital early in January after doctors had said she had made an amazing and unexpected recovery. She no longer complained of living with the horror of her children's screams or the sight of their faces twisted in pain. She told her family that she would not like anyone to suffer the torments she had suffered, the horror of that terrible screaming, the anguish of those agonised faces; although she did confess, long afterwards, that in one of her saner moments in the month before she left hospital she had prayed to God or the devil to pass her misery on to someone else. Anyone else.

Derek Benzies?

COMPETITION by David Clayton Carrad

I have often made the observation that the horror story is a ubiquitous literary form, unlike most category fiction which is more or less restricted to publications exclusively devoted to one particular genre. Yet another proof of this is “Competition,” which appeared in Running Times—not exactly the sort of magazine one looks to for a good frightening read.

David Clayton Carrad is a successful divorce lawyer, currently practicing in Wilmington, Delaware. Born May 19, 1944 in Englewood, New Jersey, Carrad earned a B.A. in English at Trinity College in Connecticut, an M.S. in journalism at Columbia University, and a J.D. at Harvard Law School. He has written numerous articles on family law for newspapers and professional publications and is co-author of Winning Equitable Distribution Cases Under the New Divorce Code (Law-Trac Seminars, 1981). “Competition” is only his second published work of fiction, the first being “one very bad short story published in my college literary magazine in 1965.”

“Competition” is about running, and Carrad is himself a runner—a solitary runner who finds this pursuit a welcome release from the intense stress of legal practice. The story was written during a rare vacation at Hilton Head Island in the summer of 1980. Carrad writes: “I have a couple of ideas which continue to simmer on the back burner for other stories, and perhaps, someday, a novel about Vietnam where I served as a company commander and AVRN advisor in 1968-69.” I wish him longer vacations; fifteen years between stories is a bit much.

The screen door slammed behind him, shattering the predawn calm like a starter’s gun. Michaelson loped into the motel parking lot, punching the start button of his wrist stopwatch with his right thumbnail. Let the door slam and start him off; one of the reasons he had picked the motel was that at this time of the year it was virtually deserted.

No breeze yet. The oceanside road in front of the motel was poorly lit, and he negotiated the curb carefully, turning south. The buzzing of the motel’s fluorescent sign was gradually replaced by the low murmur of the surf off to his left. The tentative and pale light which would soon become the dawn glowed dimly over the Atlantic, and the morning star glowed brightest of all against its

backdrop. Just right.

Had he unplugged the heating coil after his second cup of instant coffee? He thought back over his movements, from his fumbling for the alarm clock's button, through stumbling out of the tangled sheets and into the bathroom. Cold washcloth over the face to wake up. Plug the heating coil into the socket over the shaving mirror. Red lid of the instant coffee jar off, dented and dull spoon into coffee. Deciding to shave later. First cup of water boiling, unplug the heating coil. Bedside lamp on, white shorts, purple shirt, socks, awkwardly tightening the shoelaces. Someday he was going to remember to buy one of those metal hooks which ice skaters used to pull their laces tight for those early mornings when his fingers seemed so thick and fumbling.

Fingers full of blood.

Where did that come from?

2:28. Eyes down a bit for the potholes.

Drinking his first cup of coffee during his stretching exercises. Cup on the shag rug next to him, sips between situps. Plugging the coil in again while brushing his teeth. Leg stretches with his heel propped up on the edge of the cheap bureau, coffee cup on the right. Wall push-ups at the edge of the circle of light cast by the bedside lamp. Last sip of coffee. Back into the bathroom to empty his bladder. Rinsing out the cup. Strapping on the stopwatch. *Unplugging the coil*. He had.

Glance at the stars in the east.

Don't think about heating coils. Who cared if it all burned down? One cheap suitcase, four pairs of running shorts, four T-shirts, casual old clothes for the non-running hours, two paperbacks ... all of it put together wasn't worth his stopwatch. 4:22. Let it burn, start life from scratch. One solitary man, running along the edge of the sea, from nowhere to nowhere, with no baggage but what he wore on his body.

5:11.

Michaelson yawned at the beginning of an inhale. Funny. He'd never yawned while running. Didn't think you could. Something about the rhythm of breathing. He dropped his forearms below his waist, shook them like a dog shedding water, swung them behind his back a few times, and picked up the pace.

5:45. Looking at the stopwatch too often.

At least thinking about the heating coil had gotten him through the first six minutes. Like thinking about baseball statistics or conjugating Latin verbs while making love. Checking his breathing and his stride, he found he had run through his body's early morning stiffness. His body was warmed up now, and the cobwebs brushed aside. Thinking about the heating coil was good for something,

he told himself. Anything that gets you through those first few minutes is good for something. Useful.

There was a solitary pine tree up ahead to Michaelson's left. The morning star floated along with his running body as the pine tree drew nearer. The morning star brushed the tree's outer branches and hid. The shoulder of the two-lane coast road was a firm mixture of packed sand and crushed shell with an almost imperceptible slope to the left, away from the road. Michaelson could feel his right foot striking a minute fraction of a second earlier than it would on level ground. The star came out from behind the pine tree, a little dimmer in the first faint blush of the dawn behind it. The road ahead was still black, forcing him to look down and to his front.

Counting to ten with his breaths, then starting over with one. One breath for every four strides. Numbers always soothed him, distracting him from the negative thoughts that could ruin any run, anchoring his mind until it was ready to float gently away. Sometimes he counted in binary numbers, a system he had not even thought about since high school until it popped into his mind from nowhere during a run six months ago. Computer numbers, mindless and impersonal, requiring an extra mental effort and consequently offering an extra measure of distraction, when 1, 2, 3, 4 became automatic. He liked the cold, precise pattern the binary numbers made before him when he half closed his eyes and visualized them.

1
10
11
100
101
110
111
1000
1001

-
-
-

Binary numbers were one of the reasons he liked the purple T-shirt he had on. From the ads in the back of his running magazines, he occasionally sent away for five randomly assorted T-shirts; manufacturer's overruns offered at bargain prices. Three or four of every lot he threw out on the grounds of ugliness or taste (rock groups were the worst), but a few appealed to him for reasons he did not even try to fathom. One showed the green silhouette of an antelope leaping

forward against a pale brown background.

The shirt he had on was cryptic. The deep purple background was the most beautiful shade of that color he had ever seen, almost imperial. And in pure white numerals across the front, the legend:

10001

7:00

10,001 was what in binary numbers? 10 was 2, 100 was 4, 1000 was 8, 10000 must be 16. Plus one. 17. What was the 7:00 below it for? Numbers, and who cared what they meant. He bought and kept T-shirts because their bright colors and shapes pleased him for the same reasons they would please a child; the sensations of color and form on the eye, without concern for meaning or status. Not for him the racer's trophy shirts, or Acapulco, or St. Moritz, or Barbados. He took an equal pleasure in knowing that he was capable, in running as in no other part of his life, of taking delight in childish things. A green antelope springing across his chest, royal purple he could see with a brief downward glance.

8:59. The coast road curved in to the right ahead and began a gentle downhill slope. Check stride. A little short, lengthen it slightly, adjusting the angle of both legs to make sure the heels were planted firmly, striking the ground first. Check arms. Too high. Wrists below the waist, shake them loose, forearms back up but not too high. Thumbs should brush the sides of his shorts. Check breathing. Yes, I am breathing.

Michaelson laughed. No one to hear it before dawn, by the empty sea. Laugh again, and run.

Yesterday morning there had been a dead opossum flattened on the roadbed when he reached this point. Today there was nothing but a faint, discolored stain on the highway. Poor bastard, thought Michaelson, it's almost happened to me a few times. Damned cars.

9:20. Ten minutes—a little more—to the causeway.

Headlights about half a mile ahead, slowly turning onto the coast road and coming at him, high ones like a truck's. The sound of its gear changes carried over the surf.

Michaelson made himself drift a few inches closer to the center of the road, just over its white edge line. Eyes up, tracking the approaching headlights. You could sense whether an oncoming driver saw you. There was usually a momentary hesitation as the driver's foot came off the gas pedal. Then, if there was no opposing traffic, a swing out over the center line of the road. Look away, briefly, from the headlights so they don't blind you. Very close now. Bright. The purple shirt wasn't the best color for visibility in the dark. A glance down to see if the white shorts were showing; they were. Bright headlights. Look away, but

not too long. *He saw me.* Truck swinging out over the center line as Michaelson angled back to the edge of the roadway, yielding the few inches of road he had taken earlier. If the drivers didn't pull over, at least they allowed for that extra space you would suddenly vacate just before they passed.

The truck went by with a soft whoosh of air. Red tail lights. Michaelson's night vision was gone, destroyed by the glare of the headlights, and he narrowed his eyes as close to shut as he could to regain it. The truck's diesel engine was barely audible now, shifting into a lower gear. Must have turned inland, uphill.

When his night vision came back, the morning star was dimmer. The palest possible pink backlit the sky behind it. What star was it? Arcturus? Betelgeuse? Sirius? Beautiful names. Don't know a damned thing about astronomy, but beautiful names. Or—wait—wasn't the morning star really a planet? Venus? What difference does it make? The morning star is the morning star. Running is running; nothing more, nothing less. This is this. Don't try to make it something it isn't.

Still, it would be nice to know some more names of stars. And whether the morning star was a planet. Get a book out of the library when he got back?

17:02.

No, he would *not* get a book out of the library and study astronomy when he got back. That was exactly what he was trying to shake loose from in his running, a good part of the reason he was here. Look at the morning star. Feel your lungs breathing. Feel your feet moving, your legs, your hips, the swing of your arms. This is this, not something else. Look at that star. You can look at that star, and take pleasure from it, and run, or you can sit in a library and research it.

Or could you do both?

No you can't. Not if you want to see the star and just be with it the way he wanted to.

Enough. Run away, run away, he sang silently to himself. Just run away, before dawn, before anyone else is up or stirring. Look at the star, be the star, run to the star, anything, but for God's sake don't analyze the star. Be an antelope, a green antelope on a pale brown field, running in the dawn, looking at a star. Think about the star the way an antelope would think about the star. See as an animal sees, not a man.

18:32.

And tomorrow the damned stopwatch was going. Throw it off the causeway and watch it plunge a hundred feet into the sea. Never should have bought it. Never should have started racing. Run away from competition, not in it. Who's first? Who's last? How did I measure up? Further tomorrow, faster tomorrow, who's number one? Blank it out; let it go. Drift.

One of the reasons Michaelson was here was to forget all that. He had been running for two years and had found himself a few months ago crying in exhaustion and anger, second in a half-marathon. He rolled in agony on the ground at the exit from the chute, cursing himself for having ripped his body apart trying vainly to stay with the leader, despite knowing that he was much too far under his usual pace, ripping his body, tearing down what all his training had built up. Groaning and swearing, first at the winner and then at himself.

He had rested for a full week, then gradually started running again. Deliberately going out for less time than he knew he could. Breaking the training regimen he had carefully learned and practiced over the years, unlearning as much as possible. In the beginning it was a serious struggle to force himself to bring a run to an end when he *knew* his body was capable of more. But every day he ran less, forcing himself to stop, until that too became a habit. Now he had broken it all up, setting pace and distance randomly, and in the process had found a new way to cut through it all. When his mind settled into thoughts too rational, involving too much planning, he visualized his thoughts floating above his head in a comic book dialogue balloon, darting like quick silver fish inside a bowl. Gently he made the balloon absorb the pointed tail leading down to his head, like a tadpole absorbing its own tail, until the balloon full of thoughts was a perfect sphere disconnected from his own mind. He filled it, slowly, with helium and gave it a gentle mental push upward. Slowly at first it would float away, like a child's lost balloon soaring over a county fair, until the winds caught it and swept it away. It pleased him to give the thoughts inside the balloon shriller and quicker voices as they faded in volume, until the balloon winked into invisibility against the distant, distant sky.

There.

Just running ...

No dogs today. Usually there were three of them, identical German Shepherds, penned behind that wooden barrier on the right side of the road. It was topped with a chain-link fence. On the other mornings he had run the causeway their three heads had appeared, pressed closely together, over the wooden barrier, snapping and snarling in unison. Even though the barrier and fence seemed sturdy, the three dogs were clearly vicious enough to make Michaelson tighten up in apprehension every morning. But today there was only a chilly silence.

To take the edge off his apprehension of the dogs' dark lair and the silence, Michaelson stuck his tongue out at them.

Just running ...

Then, around the sweep of the road to the right, was the entrance to the causeway.

And two bright yellow lights. A car's parking lights.
Set close to the ground like feral eyes, unblinking and sharp. Glowing at him.
Crouched behind them was a low, dark shadow.

As he drew closer the shadow resolved itself into a car. He could hear the motor idling. Right at the entrance to the causeway, blocking it. Something was wrong with the shape, though, too high on the top, and now he could see the blue and white paint and the word—

Damn.

No causeway today.

SHERIFF.

Suddenly he was blind from the harsh white glare of the spotlight, stabbing out from the side of the Sheriff's car. Reluctantly he slowed, walking the last few feet to the window on the driver's side. The spotlight swivelled to follow him. His breath was ragged.

"Good morning," he said, trying to peer over the glare of the spotlight into the dark interior of the police car.

"Morning," came a deep voice from the shadowy figure inside. "Help you?"

"Just running, Sheriff." Still struggling to catch his breath for speech, Michaelson gestured with his right arm toward the causeway. "All right to run out here?"

The only sound was the low idle of the Sheriff's car, and the surf breaking over the rocks at the entrance to the causeway. Damned fool question. There were permanent wooden barriers across the entrance carrying an enormous "No trespassing" sign. The dark figure inside the car was absolutely still.

"That's a long run," the Sheriff said, finally.

Michaelson kept silent.

"From out of town?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never seen you run out here before," said the Sheriff.

What the hell, thought Michaelson. "I've run it before," he said. "I just turn around and come back." If he was arrested for that, so be it. He didn't want to miss running the causeway.

The figure inside the police cruiser said nothing. Finally, the spotlight clicked off.

"Up to you," said the voice.

Michaelson's vision began to clear again. The figure inside the cruiser became a little clearer. He wore a cowboy hat, standard for county sheriffs, but Michaelson still could not make out his face.

"It's all right?" said Michaelson.

“Sure, if you want to. Little early in the day, though, isn’t it?”

“Best time to run, Sheriff,” Michaelson said. “Thanks.”

He moved away from the driver’s window, still not quite believing it. He slipped between the stone seawall and the edge of the wooden barrier, not bothering to unlatch its wide gate. He inhaled deeply, once, and loped forward.

“The very best of luck to you today, son,” called the Sheriff.

Michaelson looked back. Inside the cruiser it looked like the Sheriff had raised a microphone, trailing a cord, to his lips.

“Thanks, Sheriff,” he called back. Curious thing to say. Probably some local variation on “Have a nice day.”

22:08.

Past the wooden barricades the causeway sloped upward for nearly half a mile, until it had risen on wooden stilts almost a hundred feet over the sea. The slope was gradual enough not to tire Michaelson, but he had to lean forward and pump his arms. Every step took him higher and higher over the sea, until the waves below were tiny lines of white froth, breaking over the boulders that anchored the causeway’s base. When he reached the top, the causeway ran in a perfectly straight line dead ahead for what Michaelson estimated was a little over six miles to the island.

One hundred feet over the surf, Michaelson straightened up and let his breathing stabilize. Straight ahead, the sun began to rise over the island. He looked down over the causeway’s waist-high wooden rail, to the sea’s motion far below until he was dizzy, then up to the dome of the sky which seemed so close he could touch it. The asphalt roadbed under his feet was noticeably softer than the concrete of the highway had been. A gull coasted on the morning wind—below him!—and Michaelson flew along the causeway halfway between sea and sky, and part of both, into the sunrise.

Michaelson had asked the bartender about the causeway two nights earlier as he sipped the last of the two beers he occasionally allowed himself. “They put it up during the war,” the bartender said, polishing a glass with his rag. “Navy used the island to store ammunition away from town, and the water out there’s too rough to take explosives out by boat.”

“Do they still use it?” Michaelson asked.

“The bartender shook his head. “Navy still owns the island, but they haven’t used it since Korea,” he said. “Nothing out there for almost thirty years.”

Michaelson sipped his beer. “Why did they build the causeway up so high?” he asked. “It must have cost a fortune.”

“Back then the fishermen were still working under sail. Best fishing ground in

those days was right between the island and the mainland. No way they'd let the Navy run it at sea level, or down so low the masts couldn't pass under it. And they had eighty, ninety foot masts on the fishing boats back then. Cost a lot, but no way they were going to let the Navy ruin the fishing. Would have put most of the town out of work. Funny thing, though, after the war the fish all moved out past the island. Never see a fishing boat out there now."

"Anybody use it these days?" Michaelson asked. He had already run the causeway twice, and found nothing on the island except one abandoned barracks building with a tarpaper roof a few yards past the island end of the causeway. He had not explored the ocean side of the island which lay over a low hill cutting the island in half.

The bartender looked up from the glass he was polishing at Michaelson. "What for?" he said.

Michaelson shrugged. "I don't know. Swimming? Fishing off the far side?"

The bartender shook his head. "Surf's too rough for both," he said.

"Be an interesting place to run," Michaelson said tentatively. He felt reluctant to admit to the bartender that he had already violated the signs—"NO TRESPASSING. U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY"—on the barricade at the mainland end of the causeway.

"Run?" The bartender put the glass down. He wiped his hands on the rag. "You a runner?"

"Yes," said Michaelson. "In fact, to tell you the truth, I've already run out there. Beautiful place."

The bartender shook his head. "Crazy bastards," he said. "Never understood how a man could get involved with such foolishness." He moved his chin upward, in the direction of Michaelson's glass. "Be a dollar forty," he said.

Michaelson drained the last quarter of his glass and put two dollar bills on the bar. "Keep it," he said.

The bartender nodded, rang the cash register and walked down the bar to serve two fishermen. Michaelson walked the two blocks back to his motel. The night insects drawn out of the darkness zoomed and smashed themselves into its fluorescent sign.

24:28. The sun was over the island now, and Michaelson found it easier to stride. The causeway stretched, high and level, straight before him to the island. Legs pumping, heart pumping, muscles warming up well. There was something about the height of the causeway over the sea that let him skim along without much effort. It felt more like running through the air than on a road. Occasionally he glanced down at the sea breaking below him or up at the sky.

All the stars were gone now, blotted out by the dawn light. Directly over the island, the sun began to rise. A blinding sliver of sunlight forced him to look left and right—anywhere but straight ahead.

30:36.

Just running ...

Less than a second before it hit him, Michaelson heard the van's engine behind him. In disbelief, he turned his head to look behind him and saw the black van already at his left shoulder. The van swung toward him, catching his hip and left arm. The blow slammed him into the wooden guardrail. He fell forward. A sharp pain stabbed his ribcage.

The van did not even slow down. It raced down the causeway toward the island, diminishing to a black speck.

Michaelson grasped the lower rung of the guardrail with both hands and pulled himself slowly to his feet. He felt his ribs with both hands and tried to get his breath back. Nothing seemed to be broken, but he was winded and his ribcage ached from the two blows it had received from the van and the guardrail.

He ran, slowly, toward the island for several minutes, his mind too dazed by the accident to think about turning back. He could remember the van striking him. He mentally reviewed it over and over again, but it made no sense to him. He ran automatically, close to a state of shock.

The van was coming back from the island.

Michaelson stepped into the middle of the causeway and put his hands on his hips. When the van got closer he would wave his arms and stop it. At least the son of a bitch had come back to see if he was all right.

The van was not slowing down.

Michaelson hesitated. He raised his arms over his head and waved them awkwardly up and down, trying to catch the driver's eye. When the van still did not slow down he moved uneasily to his right.

The black van turned slightly to aim straight at him. Two rearview mirrors in silver metal cases bulged from each side of the van.

Michaelson scrambled to the guardrail and clung to it. The roadbed of the causeway extended all the way to the rail. The black van was bearing down on him less than twenty feet away. He hugged the guardrail, turning sideways and facing out to sea to present the smallest possible target.

The van went by without slowing. He was not sure if it had touched him or if he had only felt the wind from its passage across his back, but it had been close. It sped down the causeway toward the mainland.

Michaelson's arms felt weak. He had not realized how tightly he had gripped the guardrail.

Get off the causeway and hide.

A quick glance in both directions told him he was closer to the island than to the mainland, maybe two miles away. Ten or twelve minutes if he pushed it, and if his ribs weren't badly injured. There were areas on the island where the van could not follow him.

He turned and sprinted for the island. His ribs ached, but nothing seemed to be broken. There was a dull ache when he inhaled, but nothing which seemed to slow him down. He had run through worse pain in races.

He glanced back over his shoulder every fourth or fifth stride. It made his rhythm jerky, but he could not stop himself from looking. And there it was, an evil little black speck, growing larger behind him.

He could not make the island before it reached him. But he had to gain as much ground as possible between each pass it made at him. The causeway was too narrow for the van to turn around; it would have to go to the island or the mainland to turn around between each pass. At least that gave him a sporting chance.

The rising sun reflected off the van's flat front windshield, momentarily blinding Michaelson. It was less than a half mile away.

There was no cover on the causeway, nowhere to hide. The paving ran flat from guardrail to guardrail, without even a curb to slow the van down.

He would have to go over the guardrail.

He would have to go over the guardrail and cling to its far side until the van had passed.

Another quick glance over his shoulder. It was closing on him rapidly.

Michaelson ran, glancing backward with every other step now, until he could stand it no longer. Then he stopped and scrambled over the guardrail.

There was no place below the roadbed to rest his feet. He tucked them under the bottom rung of the guardrail and clung to the top rail. It was an awkward position since it forced him to lean out backward over the ocean. The top rail was only waist-high and his arms strained to hold him in. He looked down at the ocean breaking below him, then looked quickly away. The top guardrail creaked in his hands, and he felt it pull loose from its nails by a fraction of an inch.

The van slowed and went past him. The brakelights glowed briefly and it stopped.

It began to back up.

Michaelson scrambled awkwardly to his left, back toward the mainland, retreating from the van. He moved sideways like a crab. He had to step around one of the uprights and his body dangled out over the sea.

The van smashed into the guardrail a foot in front of him. The brakelights

glowed again. Michaelson jerked his right hand off the rail and desperately continued to scramble away. His breath was coming in short, ragged gasps.

The van ran forward a few feet and stopped. It idled there for a moment as if the driver were deciding what to do, then shot forward toward the island.

Michaelson's arms began to shake. He pulled himself tighter against the rail and slowly climbed over it. Ahead, one of the top guardrails hung loosely by one end where the van had smashed it. He tried to catch his breath.

He had no time for rest, he told himself. He ran for the island. Every minute the van was away was another minute of ground he could gain, and he couldn't afford to waste even one of those minutes. He had to run now, and hide over the guardrail when it came back.

Or he could fight.

He stopped short and stood still for a few seconds. Then he turned and ran back to the broken guardrail. Hauling and tugging on the free end, he worked a short section of the rail loose. It was about three feet long and it felt like it would be heavy enough. He held it by the middle in his right hand and ran as fast as he could for the island. The guardrail's weight threw his stride awkwardly off balance.

He guessed that he was about a mile from the island when he saw the black van again. It was turning around at the end of the causeway and it started toward him. It seemed to be moving faster than it had before.

Michaelson stopped and laid his loose piece of wood carefully along the top of another section of guardrail, trying to make it as invisible as possible. He placed both hands on it, as though he were getting ready to scramble over the guardrail and cling to the outside as he had on the van's last pass at him.

He tried to slow his breathing down. He looked steadily at the van, trying to judge his timing as carefully as possible.

The license plate! If he ever made it off the causeway alive, he would need it to report the madman who was trying to kill him. And he would need a description of the driver to give the Sheriff. Why hadn't the Sheriff come by the entrance to the causeway just a few minutes later, in time to stop the van?

He had to squint into the sun. They were local license plates. RVH 927. All he could see of the driver was a young face, probably black or dark hair, and a green shirt.

RVH 927. RVH 927. Then it was on him.

When he had held his body perfectly still until his nerves were screaming, Michaelson jerked the wooden rail over his head and threw it directly at the driver. He leaped to his left, sprinting for the other side of the causeway.

The van swung sharply toward him. The piece of wood missed the windshield

entirely and clattered along the side of the van, knocking a side mirror off, before it sailed over the guardrail and tumbled lazily into the sea. Michaelson pressed himself against the guardrail on the other side of the causeway. No time to scramble over it.

The van wobbled slightly and came directly at him. He was crying. He slid along the guardrail toward the island and got just out of the way of the van's front fender before it hit the rail. This time it didn't stop. It hit the rail a glancing blow and accelerated toward the mainland.

Michaelson watched it grow smaller. He leaned against the rail to catch his breath. Less than a mile to go. *Move*, he told himself.

He tried the guardrail the van had hit on this pass at him, but he couldn't work it loose. There was nothing on the causeway he could use as a weapon except the van's side mirror. He picked it up from the roadbed and ran.

The mirror was too light to do any damage even if he made a direct hit on the windshield. The van was behind him now, and the constant glances over his shoulder threw off his stride. He wished the van were coming from the island. At least then he wouldn't feel compelled to keep glancing backward and could run faster.

RVH 927. Remember that. He could see the driver convicted of attempted murder if he got off the causeway. When he got off the causeway. Or kill the bastard with his bare hands.

He was tiring rapidly. Each pass the van made at him pumped him full of adrenaline, but as each spurt wore off it left him progressively more washed out and exhausted, the same feeling he knew from the final sprint across the finish line in his races. But he wasn't across the finish line yet. Half a mile, or a little more. He glanced over his shoulder. The van was much nearer.

Michaelson ran straight down the middle of the causeway, weaving from side to side. He glanced back over his shoulder with every other step. It slowed him down, but the van was too close to let it out of his sight for long. As it drew closer he widened the arcs of his running, swinging further to the right and left each time. The black van had to slow down as it drew closer in order to keep aiming straight at him. Michaelson knew he had to time his last swing perfectly.

He was far over to the left, almost at the guardrail. He was closest to the driver's side of the van, deliberately making it easier for him to steer accurately.

At the last possible moment Michaelson stopped and spun on his heels. He sprinted as hard as he could straight at the van, then jumped left.

The van swung back toward him, but not fast enough. It grazed him and he fell.

Michaelson rolled across the causeway. He must have pulled a muscle in his

right calf when he fell. The van loomed over him, a black giant blotting out the sun, and then he had rolled under the guardrail. He squeezed as close to the edge as he could, clinging to the bottom guardrail to keep from falling into the sea.

The van remained still, its engine idling loudly, the driver motionless inside. Suddenly, it shot off toward the island.

Michaelson got up. Somehow he was still holding the rearview mirror. He tried to run, but something had been torn, and torn badly, in his right calf, and the best he could achieve was a slow hobble.

The sun was well up over the island now, and it was almost impossible to see the van in its glare. The causeway stretched directly into the sun. Michaelson squinted. The van reached the island and turned quickly in the sand. It was coming back, faster with each pass at him, or did it just seem that way?

You bastard, thought Michaelson. You know you've only got one more chance. A few hundred yards and I'm safe, off the causeway. You get one more chance.

He couldn't dodge it this time, not with his crippled right leg. The causeway was still too high for him to hang over the edge and let himself fall safely into the sea. If he tried to cling to the outside of the guardrail, he had a feeling the van would butt him off, over the edge. He stopped, panting, in the middle of the road. The van was coming faster.

The mirror.

He brought the mirror up in his right hand and aimed it at the sun, then down. He saw the spot of brilliant reflected sunlight on the asphalt in front of him, then tilted the mirror slowly until the sunbeam hit the flat black front of the van. He angled it carefully upward until, as well as he could judge at this distance, it was right on the spot on the windshield in front of the driver's eyes. There. He jiggled the mirror microscopically to keep it in the driver's eyes as the van drew nearer. As cautiously as he could, keeping the mirror steady in his right hand, he moved to the left, until his right arm was stretched straight out to his side. His right arm began to tremble, but he forced it to be still.

Was it his imagination, or was the black van wobbling slightly in its course? Steady, he whispered to himself.

It was wobbling, and it was slowing down. As the van crept blindly toward him, Michaelson tracked it with the reflected beam of sunlight. It slowed down, nearly stopping. Get ready to jump, he thought.

The van's front wheels turned to the right and it shot past him. Bastard, he thought, and then, *run*. Now you can make it. It doesn't have time to get to the mainland, turn around and come for you again, even with the crippled right leg.

He heard the van's brakes squeal behind him. When he looked over his

shoulder, he saw it backing up, straight at him.

He turned to run, but his right leg gave out beneath him, and he fell on the causeway. His body twisted over his crippled leg. He rolled awkwardly to face the van. His cheek was pressed into the asphalt. His vision was blurred from the pain. Was that the Sheriff's car, coming slowly toward the island, which he thought he could see framed between the undercarriage of the van and the roadbed? RVH 927. Must remember that. The last thing he saw was one of the van's oversized rear tires bearing directly down on him.

An hour and a half later, the sun was high enough to make the unfinished pine boards on the abandoned Navy barracks begin to sweat sap. Flies buzzed in the scrub grass. A man was sitting in a straight-backed wooden chair tipped back against the barracks wall, when the black van pulled up. It sparkled in the sunlight, freshly washed and polished. The man who got out of the van was wearing a green T-shirt. Across the front in white numerals was the legend:

10001

9:00

He nodded to the sitting man, who said "Morning, Bobby."

Bobby was carrying a crumpled piece of purple fabric in his right hand and the keys to the van in his left. He tossed the keys to the sitting man, and they sparkled in the sunlight as they flew through the air. The sitting man reached up and caught them without moving.

Bobby went into the barracks. When he came out a few minutes later he was wearing Michaelson's T-shirt. He began doing stretching exercises for his legs against the barracks wall. When the sitting man saw the purple shirt, he raised his eyebrows.

"Think you're ready for a seven, Bobby?" he asked.

Bobby dropped his left leg and propped his right on the barracks wall, stretching forward to touch his toes. "I'll buy you a beer back in town," he said. His voice had the edge of arrogance a young man sometimes uses in talking with an older one, especially an older man in a position of authority.

The sitting man shook his head. He said nothing until Bobby finished his stretching exercises and looked over toward him. The sitting man punched the start button on his stopwatch with his right thumbnail and said, "The very best of luck to you today, Bobby."

"Thanks, Sheriff," said Bobby.

He jogged toward the causeway. His shoes kicked up small clouds of dry sand which hung in the air for a few seconds after he had passed.

The Sheriff sat gazing out at the causeway until his stopwatch read 6:02. He

tipped the chair forward until its front legs hit the ground. He got up and stretched, thrusting his arms high into the air, and climbed into the van.

Its interior was hot from the sun, so he left the driver's door open.

When his stopwatch read 6:30, the Sheriff started the van's engine. It idled quietly.

At 6:48 he shut the van's door. He looked out over the causeway. All of them had argued about its exact length back in the beginning until he had borrowed a precision odometer about a year ago and measured it with the patrol car. Exactly 10,001 meters from end to end. After that, they had had the T-shirts printed up.

He looked for the purple dot that would be Bobby, but it was out of sight.

At 7:00—not a second late, not a second early—the Sheriff put the black van in gear and drove onto the causeway.

EGNARO by M. John Harrison

Born in 1945, not far from Catesby Hall, gathering place of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, M. John Harrison was educated at Rugby and lived for a time in London before moving to the Holme Valley, where he lives in a cottage on the edge of the Peak District National Park and indulges his suicidal hobby of rock-climbing when not writing. Better known as a science fiction writer, Harrison sold his first story in 1966 and served as literary editor of the controversial New Wave magazine, New Worlds, from 1968-1975—"an unpaid position but one which allowed considerable scope when it came to biting the hand that fed you." His science fiction books include the novels, The Committed Men and The Centauri Device, and the collection, The Machine in Shaft Ten. Fantasy Fans know Harrison for his excellent Viriconium Sequence: The Pastel City, A Storm of Wings, and In Viriconium. Horror fans should know his work, as well.

Like fellow British writer, Ramsey Campbell, M. John Harrison demonstrates a morbid fascination with urban seediness, drawing upon the numbing ugliness and grimy squalor of industrial slums as background to his fiction. Campbell has described a theme of Harrison's work as "the occult power of apathy." "Egnaro" appeared in Winter's Tales 27, a hardbound anthology published each Christmas by Macmillan. The British have a traditional love for spooky stories at Christmastime, and Winter's Tales has become a tradition itself after a quarter of a century. This is not to say that "Egnaro" is traditional in any respect.

Egnaro is a secret known to everyone but yourself.

It is a distant country, or some city to which you have never been; it is an unknown language. At the same time it is like being cuckolded, or plotted against. It is a part of the universe of events which will never wholly reveal itself to you: a conspiracy the barest outline of which, once visible, will gall you forever.

It is in conversations not your own (so I learnt from Lucas) that you first hear of Egnaro, and in situations peripheral to your real life. Egnaro reveals itself in minutiae, in that great and very real part of our lives when we are doing nothing important. You wait outside the library in the rain: an advert for a new kind of vacuum pump, photographed against a background of cycads and conifers,

catches your eye. “Branch offices everywhere!” Old men sit on the park benches, and as you pass make casual reference to some forgotten campaign in the marshes of a steamy country. You are always in transit when you hear of Egnaro, in transit or in limbo. A book falls open and you read with a sudden inexpressible frisson of nostalgia, “Will I ever return there?” (Outside, rain again, falling into someone else’s garden; a wet black branch touches the window in the wind.) A woman at a dinner party murmurs, “Egnaro, where the long sunlit esplanades lift from a wine-dark sea ...”

It is this overheard, fragmentary quality which is so destructive. By the time you have turned your head the woman is speaking of tomatoes and hot-house flowers; someone has switched off the news broadcast with its hints of a foreign war; the accountant in the seat opposite you on the train has folded up his *Daily Telegraph* preparatory to getting off at Stockport. You forget immediately. Egnaro—in the beginning at least—hides itself in the interstices, the empty moments of your life.

Lucas himself had a similar incidental quality. He was a fattish, intelligent, curly-haired man, between thirty and forty years old and prone to migraine headaches, who had worked his way up from records and goldfish in the Shude Hill Market to a shabby bookshop on one of the grim streets behind Manchester library. I did his accounts once a month in a filthy office he kept above the shop; afterwards he would treat me to a Chinese meal and pay me in cash, for which I was grateful. I sold some of my wife’s books to him when she died. He was quite decent to me on that occasion.

He conducted the business evasively. Receipts were scribbled *on* decaying brown paper bags, in a variety of hands. He had three signatures. I never knew how many people he employed. He never paid his bills. He concealed from me almost as much as he was concealing from his suppliers, his partners, and his V.A.T. inspector. To tell the truth I let him hide as much as he pleased: no-one in the grey streets outside cared, and I was glad of the work. I hated the office, with its litter of half-empty plastic cups and plates of congealed food; but I liked the shop. After the rambling, apologetic evasions upstairs it had a sour candour.

Its window was packed with colourful American comics sellotaped into plastic bags, and its door was always open. Inside it was the relict of a dozen bankruptcy cases: car rental, cheap shoes, do-it-yourself. Lucas had ripped out the original fitments, leaving raw scars on the wall to remind him, and replaced them with badly carpentered shelves. A tape-player and two loudspeakers pumped the narrow aisles full of a crude music which drew in the students and teenagers who made up his bread and butter clientele. They came in full of a sort of greedy idealism, to buy science fiction and crank-cult material—books about

spoon-bending, flying saucers and spiritualism—books by Koestler and Crowley, Cowper-Powys and Colin Wilson—all the paraphernalia of that ‘new’ paradigm which so attracts the young. As a sideline Lucas sold them second hand records, posters, novelties, and—from a basement stinking of broken lavatories and mould—film magazines, biographies of James Dean, and children’s comics.

They loved it. Every flat surface was strewn with the poor stuff they wanted, and I don’t think that any of them ever realised that Lucas hated them, or that this was his revenge on them.

He kept the pornography at the rear of the shop. On slack afternoons he would stand behind the cash desk, sealing the new stock into plastic wrappers so that the customers couldn’t maul it. This activity seemed to relax him. His plump fingers had performed the task so often that they worked unsupervised, deftly folding the wrapper, pulling the Sellotape off the reel, smoothing it down, while Lucas’s thoughts went elsewhere and his face took on a collapsed, distant expression; so that he looked, with his curly hair and smooth skin, like a corrupt but puzzled cherub. Occasionally he would leaf through a copy of *Rustler* or *Big Breasted Women in Real Life Poses* before he sealed it up, or stare with sudden stony contempt at the businessmen browsing the back shelves.

Once or twice a month the police would come unannounced and remove his entire stock in black polythene dustbin bags. No-one expected this to have any effect. He had the shelves full again the next day. They treated him with a jocular familiarity—and in the face of their warrants and destruction orders he was resentful but polite. He made no distinction between pornography and science fiction, often wondering out loud why they confiscated the one and not the other.

“It all seems the same to me,” he maintained. “Comfort and dreams. It all rots your brain.” Then, reflectively: “Give them what they want and take the money.”

Though he believed his analogy, his cynicism wasn’t as simple as it seemed. The art student, with his baggy trousers and his magenta-dyed hair, coming in for the latest Carlos Castaneda or John Cowper-Powys; the shopgirl who asked in a distracted whine, “Got anything about Elvis Presley? Any books? Badges?”; the accounts executive in the three piece suit who snapped back his cuff to consult his digital watch before folding the new issue of *Young Girls in Full Colour* or *Omni* into his plastic attaché case: I soon saw that Lucas’s contempt for them stemmed from his fellow-feeling.

In unguarded moments he showed me some of his own collection: florid volumes illustrated in the Twenties and Thirties by Harry Clark; Beardsley prints and Burne-Jones reproductions. He had newspapers from the Fifties and Sixties, announcing the deaths of politicians and pop stars; he had original recordings by

Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. If he knew exactly what the teenagers wanted to buy, it was because he was privy to their dreams; it was because he had haunted the back streets of London and Manchester and Liverpool only a few years before, searching for a biography of Mervyn Peake, a forgotten novel, a bootleg record. And if he hated them it was because he had lost their simplicity, their ability to be comforted, the ease with which they consummated their desires.

He was trapped between the fantasy on the shelves, which no longer satisfied him, and the meaningless sheaves of invoices floating in pools of cold coffee on the desk upstairs. Therein lay his susceptibility to Egnaro. Where my own lay I am not half so sure.

“We all love a mysterious country,” said Lucas.

We were sitting in his office, looking through his collection, warming our hands over the one-bar fire which drew a sour, failed smell from the piles of ancient magazines and overflowing waste bins. The accounts for February were finished. His takings were down, he claimed, his overheads up. All that month a wind from Siberia had been depressing the city-centre, scouring Deansgate from the cathedral eastward, and forcing its way into the shops. Downstairs the tape-player was broken. Students drifted listlessly past in ones or twos, or clustered round the window with their collars tinned up, arguing over the value of the cheap stuff inside.

“For instance,” Lucas explained, leaning over my shoulder to turn a page; “This tribe has lived for centuries under a volcano on an island somewhere off the south west coast of Africa. The exact latitude is unknown. Their elders worship the volcano as a god, they’re said to have inhuman powers.” He turned several pages at once, his pudgy fingers nimble. “It’s the draughtsmanship I love. There! You can see every head under the water, even the straws they’re breathing through. Look at that stipple. You won’t find drawing like that in the rubbish downstairs.”

He sighed.

“I used to spend hours with this stuff as a kid. See the spider monkeys, trapped in the burning village? They act as the eyes of the witch doctor: he never sees anything for the rest of his life but flames!”

He had been preoccupied all day, sometimes depressed and edgy, at others full of the odd nostalgic eagerness which with him stood in for gaiety. He couldn’t settle to anything. Now he was showing me an illustrated omnibus of some American writer popular in the Nineteen Twenties, Edgar Rice Burroughs or Abraham Merrit, which had cost him, he said, over a hundred pounds. It had

been privately printed a decade ago and was very hard to come by. I could make little of it, and was surprised to find he kept it with his treasured editions of *Under the Hill* and *Salome*. The pictures seemed badly drawn and drab, unwittingly comic in their portrayal of albino gorillas and wide-eyed, frightened women; the tales themselves fragmentary, motiveless and unreal.

“I’ve never seen much of it,” I admitted.

Personally, I told him, I had adored Kipling at that age. (Even now, if I close my eyes, I can still picture ‘the cat who walked alone’, his tail stuck up in the air like a brush and that poor little mouse speared on the end of his sword.) When he didn’t respond I closed the book with exaggerated care.

“It’s very nice,” I said, “but not my sort of thing. Are you hungry yet?”

But he was staring down into the cold black street.

“It’s almost as if he’d been there, don’t you think?” he said. “Watching the way the ash drifts down endlessly over the pumice terraces.”

He was talking to himself, but he couldn’t do it alone. He was trying to woo me, even though we had so little in common he didn’t know what to say. His obsession had him by the throat, and the Rice Burroughs volume had only been an introduction, a way of preparing me. Later I would begin to recognise these moods, and learn how to respond to them. Now I merely watched while he shook his head absently, abandoned the window, and, breathing heavily through his mouth, made a pretence of fumbling through the heaps of stuff under the desk. The book he came up with fell open, from long usage, at a page about halfway through. I see now that this is what he had wanted to show me all along. He looked at it for a minute, his lips moving slightly as he scanned the text, then nodded to himself and thrust it into my hands.

“I always wondered what this meant,” he said, with a peculiar deprecatory shrug. “You might be interested in it: what he really meant by it.”

It was an American paperback, one of those with the edges of the pages dyed a dull red and the paper that smells faintly of excrement. There were newer editions of it in the shop downstairs, in fact it was quite popular. Its author claimed to link certain astronomical events with the activities of various secret societies and Gnostic sects, although what he hoped to prove by this was unclear. It was called *The Castles of the Kings*, or something similar. The bookstalls have been full of this sort of thing for the last ten years; but Lucas’s copy had been bought in the mid Fifties when it was not so common, and its pages were tobacco brown with age. While I was reading it he fussed round the office, shuffling through the invoices, trying to tidy the desk, warming his hands at the fire: but I could feel him watching me intently.

“We know what we see,” the passage began, “or think we do ...” And it went

on:

... but is it possible that the real pattern of life is not in the least apparent, but rather lurks beneath the surface of things, half-hidden and only apparent in certain rare lights, and then only to the prepared eye? A secret country, a place behind the places we know, which seems to have but little connection to the obvious schemes of the universe?

In certain lights and at certain seasons the inhabitants of any city can see enormous faces hanging in the air, or words of fire. Also, one house in an otherwise dark street will be seen to be lit up at night for a week, even though no-one lives there. From it will come sounds of revelry, although no-one is observed to enter or leave it. Suddenly all is quiet and dark again, as if nothing had happened! But ordinary people will remember.

Scientists give us many explanations to choose from. Are we really to believe that reality is built from tiny motes whirling invisibly about one another?

There was more of this; an account of an eclipse witnessed in China during the fourteenth century; and then the following curious paragraph:

In India newly married couples wade in the estuarine mud catching fish in a new garment. "What do you see?" their friends call from the bank. "Sons and cattle!" is the answer. Are we to doubt that India exists? In the Dark Ages they had never heard of America! When the Jew of Tunis exhibited a fish's tail on a cushion, did anyone doubt that it was a fish?

"I don't quite see what he's getting at," I said.

"Ah," said Lucas. He thought for a moment. He had expected my reaction, I could see, but was disappointed all the same. "You saw the hole in his argument though?" He took the book gently from my hands and returned it to its heap. "You saw through that?"

"Oh yes," I said, as positively as I could: "I saw that."

But he seemed dissatisfied. He stared at me for some time as if I had tried to mislead him over something obvious—the time of a train, say, or the name of a popular actress. I put my coat on under his watery blue-eyed gaze and we went out of the office in silence. It occurred to me suddenly that he saw no flaw at all in that 'argument', such as it was; and I wondered briefly how many casual acquaintances like myself had been invited up to the office to puzzle over *The Castles of the Kings*; and how many more he had lent it to, in the hope that they would see what he saw in its skeins of unoriginal rhetoric and curious

misinterpretations of the world.

Downstairs he looked round the shop with dislike; pocketed the take—perhaps eighty pounds—after a short discussion with the bored lad behind the cash desk; and locked up. As we stood on the doorstep, fastening our coats against the scatter of snow coming down on the black Manchester air, he turned to me and dismissed it all with,

“Good for a laugh, though, that passage? Good for a laugh, anyway!” And I had the feeling he’d said that many times, too. “By the way,” he went on, in the same dismissive tone: “Have you heard of this place they call ‘Egnaro’?”

“That’s the Javanese place on Cross Street, isn’t it?” I said. I thought perhaps he was bored with Chinese food. “Would you like to try it tonight instead of the Lucky Lotus? We could easily go there.”

He looked at me as if this was the last answer in the world he had been expecting; then gave a queasy, almost placatory laugh.

“‘Easily go there’!” he said, and took my arm.

Egnaro: it was a word, I found, that came easily to the tongue.

“Do you ever think,” said Lucas later, prodding his chicken curry, “that the only part of your life that really mattered is over?” And, without giving me a chance to answer: “I do.”

We were sitting in the Lucky Lotus, listening to the wet raincoats dripping in the alcove behind us.

“No, don’t laugh,” he said. “I’m serious. Once your childhood’s over up here, they put you in the toothpaste factory. You get a council house in Blakely. You get piles, and watch ‘Coronation Street’ for the rest of your life.”

He ate in the Lotus two or three times a week, mostly on his own, because it saved him the trouble of cooking for himself when he got home. The little Malay waitresses, I think, realised he was lonely, and surrounded him as soon as he sat down, joking about the weather in their gluey inexplicable accents. They had made of him a fixture, a fetish; and the Lotus, with its hideous maroon flock wallpaper, dirty tablecloths and congealed rice, seemed like a natural extension of the office on Peter Street. He ate his food with a sort of lugubrious greed, planting his elbows firmly on the table before he began, eyeing his plate suspiciously, and surrounding it with his forearms as if he thought someone might take it away before he had finished.

“That hasn’t happened to you,” I pointed out. “You’ve got the shop. You’ve chosen a different kind of life.”

He stared for a long time at a piece of meat on the end of his fork. “You never escape,” he said finally. Then: “Look, I don’t want to put you off, but could you

just smell this?" He waved the fork under my nose. "It tastes a bit funny."

He had been in a curiously self-pitying state since showing me *The Castles of the Kings*. I suspected that he regretted revealing even this small corner of his private life. We make ourselves vulnerable with confidences. But whether this was so or not, now he had broached the subject he was unable to leave it alone. I had an uneasy impression that he was approaching some sort of crisis. He had drunk a lot of lager with the barbecued spare ribs, but I could see that it had given him little relief from whatever was worrying him. After I had reassured him about the chicken, which seemed perfectly all right to me, he said:

"I used to think: 'What if the maps were all wrong and the world was full of undiscovered countries!' Undiscovered countries! What a joke."

His jaws moved slowly from side to side; then he shook his head, swallowed, and pushed his plate away.

"It was too late even then. The world was full of housing estates." He stared into the distance. "The Twenties and Thirties—that was the time to be young. You could still have believed they'd made a mistake then."

While I was thinking about this a waitress came up and asked, "Dya wa' so' costa' na'?"

"What?" I said.

She giggled.

"Wan' costa'? Rass pa'?"

"Oh yes," said Lucas. "Custard and rice pud." He nodded vigorously at her. "I've been having that all week," he explained to me. "They soon get used to your habits here. Sometimes I can't understand a word they say. I think that's why I come."

She brought him his sweet.

"As a kid (and you'll laugh at this, I warn you)," he said, "I used to believe that I'd been born on some unknown continent and brought here by slavers. When I shut my eyes at night I could hear voices like hers, above the sound of the breakers on some rotting beach. It was the most frightening country in the world. The river deltas were full of radioactive silt. The natives mined a kind of green gold. They were beautiful—almost white, very intelligent, very tall and kind. It was somewhere in the Antarctic."

He put down his spoon and stared around. He gulped suddenly.

"Christ," he whispered. "I'd still rather be there than here!" And he looked quickly down into the sticky mess on his plate.

I didn't quite know what to say.

"I'm sure we all feel like that sometimes," I tried. "But isn't it escapism? Perhaps the housing estates are the real undiscovered countries—"

He gave me a look of contempt.

“Very clever. You’ve never lived on one of the fuckers.”

He was silent for a long time after that. The place had been full of clerks and secretaries having their dinner before they went to the cinema round the corner on Deansgate, the women in their winter boots, the men in their three-piece suits. Now it emptied itself steadily, marooning me with him. The manager, who spoke no English though his arithmetic was perfect, came out from behind the bar; and, with the girls clustered twittering around him, began some sort of game at a vacant table. Lucas stirred his pudding round in its thick white dish until it was cold, taking small sips of the sticky, coffee-flavoured liqueur he had ordered earlier. I bit my lip and concentrated on the wall, embarrassed. Suddenly he looked up again. Tears were running down his cheeks.

“Are you sure you’ve heard nothing about Egnaro?” he said.

“The thing is,” he continued, before I could say anything, “that I’ve just about convinced myself a place like that exists.” He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. “I’m sorry. It’s that I get the feeling everyone else knows, you see: and they aren’t telling me.” He laughed. “Stupid, isn’t it? I suppose we all get stupid ideas.” He got up and pulled a roll of dirty five pound notes from his pocket. “Will twenty quid do you this month? I’m a bit short at the moment. You know how it is. I’ll get the bill.”

I made him sit down and drink a cup of coffee. I made him tell me about Egnaro, and now I wish more than anything else in the world that I hadn’t.

The dead miners of Egnaro lie looking up at the sun, the blackness of their flesh tarring the long bones. A gull spreadeagles itself on the air above them; a hot wind blows along the shore, peeling off a few flakes of gold leaf that still cling to their darkened skin. Egnaro!—it is a dangerous place, which steals over you like a dream. It is the name of your most basic questions about the universe, it is the funnel-tip from which your life fans back. All myths are perversions of its history; it is the secret behind the apparent history of the world. It is at once inside and outside you, and it signals all men at some time in their lives, like a flare of electricity along their nerves. It is as simple as a conversation half-heard on top of a bus—

“A woman sitting near me spoke to her neighbour. It was my stop. The bus gave a lurch and I had to get off. Standing there on the pavement in the rain I realised she had said: ‘Egnaro, where they have so many more senses to choose from!’ I knew immediately I had misheard her: I laughed and walked off. But I recalled it later, and it has come to haunt me.”

This was how Lucas began his explanation, under the dripping raincoats in the

Lucky Lotus that evening at the end of February. I had to prompt him to begin with. (Had he, for instance, heard the other woman's reply? It turned out he hadn't.) But as his confidence grew, though he was often confused and incoherent, he seemed to exchange his self-pity for a kind of puzzled wonder: his eyes took on a watery glint of enthusiasm, his speech a crude lyrical quality. He spoke for a long time. Couples came in, ate under the dim lights, and went out again. The waitresses eyed us benignly and giggled. After all he was a fixture there. Would he like some more costa'?

“ ‘Egnaro, where they have so many more senses to choose from!’ ”

From the moment he heard that meaningless half-sentence, a kind of dam seems to have burst in his brain. “It was like rubbing condensation off a window pane and looking out at a landscape you don't understand.” He was inundated by hints and clues, often of the slenderest nature. In an issue of the *Sunday Times Business News* he had picked up from the floor of a train he read: “Exploration budget cutbacks could still stall our industrial recovery.” He knew exactly what he was supposed to gather from that, but he couldn't say how. In two critical lines of Louis MacNeice's *Streets of Laredo* he discovered this misprint: “‘Egnaro the golden is fallen, is fallen;/Your flame shall not quench nor your thirst shall not slake.’ ” It was someone else's copy of the book. And once, sheltering from a thunderstorm in the doorway of Tesco's, he had this bizarre experience—

The lightning flickered like a broken fluorescent lamp. Between flashes the sky was dim and greasy. The porch began to fill up with cripples also sheltering from the rain. “Every poor handicapped bastard in Blakely seemed to have ended up in that porch.” They had been gathered in, Lucas felt, not by the wind and the rain, but by omens and premonitions experienced that morning in front of the gas stove. They came prodded by ‘instincts that last meant something when we were all frogs’. There were old ladies with blasted arthritic fingers and great varicose carbuncles; a tall man staring at the shiny stump of his left arm and singing hymns; a girl with a deformed lip and leg-irons. There was a very small woman with a hump on her back. “You felt,” Lucas said, “that if you asked them why they'd come here the answer would be: ‘My dog spoke to me of Egnaro, the queer old thing, and I came;’ or, ‘I heard we would all be cured there.’ I felt that very strongly.” But they only looked at him; and, when the rain had stopped, left him there with his shoes full of water. “None of them actually spoke.”

Thus Egnaro simultaneously hid from and revealed itself to him; in obliquities. “It was impossible to verify anything,” he complained. “The taxi was always driving away from me; by the time I looked up it had gone. I always

found I'd used the newspaper to light the fire. People took back books I hadn't finished reading."

He searched through all the atlases and encyclopaedias he could find, but discovered nothing (although once, in *Baedeker's Northern Italy*, he came upon a typographical error which looked like 'Ignar' or 'Ignari'; it was on a map of Livorno, near the new port). Nothing was made public, but by now he could hear the conspiracy all around him. It made an expectant sound, he said, like people filing into a cathedral or an empty concert hall. It had affected the economy of the country, he believed; it had soured and complicated international relations. Fleets were outfitting on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Channel, the Baltic, and all along the Mediterranean seaboard, in a race to exploit the new country. Whoever got there first would reap enormous wealth from its mineral resources, the new sciences of its mysterious inhabitants, its incredible new animals; besides an immense strategic advantage. As soon as its exact whereabouts were known they would put to sea. Although this secret was jealously guarded, preparations so massive were necessarily known to many; ordinary people had been quick to pick up the rumour.

"They discuss it as a place to go for their *holidays!*" said Lucas, in tired disgust. "Will it be cheaper than Majorca? Its beaches less crowded than the Costa Blanca?"

("Costa'? Costa'?'")

Suddenly we were back at the beginning. His face had collapsed into self pity again and he had buried his head in his hands.

"Don't you see?" he appealed. "If I don't find something out soon they'll get there before me!" His shoulders shook. "That's the real horror of it, don't you see? If there really is such a place then by the time *I* get there it'll be just the same as it is here!"

And he stared miserably at the maroon flock walls of the Lucky Lotus, the tears streaming down his cheeks again.

What could I do? I was appalled by his condition. And yet what he had said did not really touch me. I had always rather admired his cynical resilience; I couldn't begin to imagine as yet the state he had got himself into. I remember thinking, 'How can anyone have become so desperately lost?' But that may have been much later; and besides we never quite know what we mean by thoughts like that. Somehow I got him to cheer up and pay the bill. It was nine or ten o'clock at night by now. The waitresses fussed round him but he didn't seem to notice them. He forgot his briefcase and they came running out after us with it. He thanked them absently. All it ever had in it was an old copy of *Rustler* and some broken pencils. When we emerged on to the deathly quiet streets behind

Deansgate he said he'd walk up to the cab rank in St Peter's Square. I went with him that far but I couldn't wait.

"You'll be all right?" I asked him.

"Oh yes," he said. "I've just got a bit of headache now. I'll have a couple of Veganin at home. They'll get me off to sleep." He got hold of my arm. "It's just a silly idea, all this, you know. I'll get over it."

There he stood, looking battered and out of place in the February wind, his loneliness outlined by the great doorway of the Midland Hotel behind him. There didn't seem to be many taxis about.

The city centre was slow to recover from that winter. March was bitter; late snow in April flattened the daffodils and filled the gutters with brown slush; Easter came early but did nothing to help trade. People were reluctant to come out in the sharp unseasonable winds; they had no money when they did. Turnover fell in all the luxury shops and most of the supermarkets. Deansgate took on a deserted, shabby appearance. You could find a few office workers hurrying out at lunchtime, but they were avoiding the pedestrian arcades of King Street where the spring fashions made colourful but somehow remote displays behind the plate glass windows. The sandwich bars were empty. How much of Lucas's failure was part of this wider picture, how much his own fault, is hard to say.

Towards the end of March, government waste committees threatened to cut the student grant for the third time in twelve months. (A few puzzled protesters marched down Peter Street with placards and a petition, only to drift off aimlessly when they reached the Square.) Shortly afterwards Lucas fell out with his main paperback suppliers, who were justifiably sick of him not paying his bills. Then, as the students trickled back and trade picked up, a series of leading articles devoted to 'these brokers of porn and purveyors of filth' appeared in the *Evening News*; and for a while the shelves at the back of the shop were raided almost every afternoon. This made Lucas's staff nervous and edgy: they ran out of false names to give the police and, tiring of Lucas's promises to have the tape-player mended, left him one by one.

Throughout this period he was preoccupied and indecisive. He fobbed his creditors off with increasingly dull excuses; absent-mindedly signed his own name on agreements he could not hope to keep; and, whenever he could find someone to look after the shop for him, sat upstairs trying to control his headaches with handfuls of Veganin. "You'd better start coming twice a month," he told me, sensing that someone had to keep track of his called-in loans, convoluted trade-offs and trails of broken promises. "Why don't we work out a

system for you?” I suggested, but he couldn’t follow it, and he never wrote anything down now anyway. The take went straight into his trouser pockets at the end of each day and he paid off his bills in cash installments, twenty or thirty pounds at a time. When I complained that the V.A.T. people weren’t happy with his figures he asked pettishly, “What sort of figures do they *want*? Surely that’s your job!”

“I won’t just make things up,” I warned him, and he shrugged. It was an argument we had been through before. “Everyone’s corrupt,” he said. “In the end.” I couldn’t tell if it was a statement or a prediction. A worse row blew up between us in mid-April, when I found among his ‘accounts’ a bit of paper on which he’d written, *Egnaro! My heart yearns for some sight of your cloud-capped cliffs!* It was hard to read the rest, which had something to do with an oil-rig disaster and a ‘secret’ television play.

“I thought you’d got over this,” I said, as lightly as I could. “I’m not sure what George will make of it.” George Labrom was the Customs and Excise inspector. We were expecting him that afternoon. I knew him slightly: he was a decent, even indulgent man, but he disliked Lucas, and his patience was diminishing. “Still, if you want me to I’ll try and fit it in somewhere ...” But Lucas wouldn’t let me make a joke of it. He bit his lip, sighed heavily, and went over to the window where it would be easier to ignore me.

“Come on Lucas,” I said angrily. “Don’t make me do all the work.”

He shrugged.

“You never ‘get over it’,” he whispered. “I thought you understood that. It never lets you go.” Then he laughed sourly. “What use is all this anyway? I’d rather have Egnaro than bloody George Labrom. If you don’t want to help me —”

“I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself,” I pointed out.

“Fuck off then if that’s your attitude.”

And we faced one another across the desk, the litter of unpaid bills and falsified invoices stretching between us like a paper continent neither of us remember how to cross. After that I got used to his silences as I had got used to the smell of his waste bin. Every fortnight when I pushed open the office door I would find him staring out of the window at the pedestrians below. “Christ, how I hate those bastards!” he would say, apropos of nothing; or, pushing out his lower lip petulantly, complain about the headaches that stopped him from sleeping. “I had a sickener last night. A real sickener.” I caught him pasting press-cuttings into a series of scrap books he had kept since he was fourteen—recording with a kind of morose glee the bankruptcies and deaths of the Fifties pop stars who had been his adolescent heroes.

In his absence (for it was an absence, as I now know from experience, even if he sat there all day) someone broke the shop window and stole most of the more valuable comics; he had allowed the insurance to lapse, and it was never properly reglazed. Inside he put up notices saying, *We do not want people reading these magazines if they have no intentions of buying!*—but by now his stock was so old that even the businessmen had abandoned the back shelves. (They were the last to go: years afterwards, you felt, they would still be wandering hopefully along Peter Street in their lunch hour, like animals searching for a lost waterhole.) Once or twice I sat behind the desk myself, putting books in bags under the dusty, flickering strip lights. It was a novelty at first—but the cold cavernous silence, the filthy blue carpets, and the innuendos of the debt-collectors soon frightened me off. One Tuesday morning in May I had the bailiffs in, two heavily built men in sheepskin car-coats, who knew Lucas of old.

They leafed through old issues of *Cockade* while they waited for him to turn up with his last quarter's rent. It was, they said, a month overdue. When he arrived he was smiling, puffed, red in the face, the jacket of his safari suit flapping open as if he had been running all over the city since eight o'clock in the morning. "Oh, hello gents," he said. "If you'd given me a bit more time ... Still, I've got just under half of it here, and I'm off for the rest now." In fact he only had a third, and when he came back again he had nothing at all, so they took his keys, locked the shop up, and over the next few days sold off the remaining stock by auction. It went for an average of ten pence a book, I believe, and certainly didn't fetch enough for the rent.

Included among all the bales of *Count, Peaches and Chariots of the Gods* was Lucas's collection from the upper room: every one of his Beardsleys, Harry Clarks, first editions of Ishmael Reed.

He wanted to try and buy some of the stuff back, so I went with him to the auction. It was a dismal affair conducted in a large empty Edwardian room. A lot of his competitors were there, nodding to him nervously as they bought up his assets, hoping he wouldn't commit suicide in the lavatories and wondering who would 'go bump' next. He hardly bought anything. *Lysistrata* had gone at the beginning, stuffed in among a bunch of old science fiction magazines. He seemed stunned that no-one there could tell the difference. "They can't even bloody pronounce it," he kept saying. "The bastards!" He drank a lot at lunchtime and began to complain of a headache. He seemed reluctant to be on his own and in the afternoon insisted we go to the cinema, where we watched uncomprehendingly some sort of comedy. The flickering of the screen made his migraine worse, and when we came out he was blinking and shaking his head.

“What will you do now?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said irritably. “Go home and watch ‘Crossroads’, I suppose. What else is there?”

It was the rush hour. As we pushed our way through the pedestrians the traffic was beginning to congeal at the junction of Peter Street and Deansgate, where no-one ever obeys the traffic lights. Lucas turned down toward the shop. He had spotted quite a large crowd of students and children gathered in front of the cracked window. They seemed to be waiting for the door to open. The younger ones kept trying it, rattling the handle then pressing their noses to the plate glass; they peered into the gloomy depths of the place, where they could just make out looming empty shelves and torn posters. The students, meanwhile, leaned against the wall with their hands in their pockets; and it was one of them who got up the courage to approach us, unzipping a plastic holdall.

“Want to buy some records?” he asked in a slow voice. He offered the open bag for inspection. This seemed to incense Lucas, who blinked and rubbed his forehead wildly.

“It’s closed down, you stupid bugger!” he shouted. “Can’t you see?”

The rest of them turned slowly, like cattle interrupted drinking, and stared at him.

“Closed! Finished! Understand? You won’t be getting any more of that here!”

He laughed. He swayed.

“What’s the matter Lucas?” I said. “Come away!”

He pushed at me.

“Leave me alone, I’m all right,” he said. In a quieter voice he advised the crowd, “Piss off and find someone else.” They watched him stagger off down Peter Street towards the Midland Hotel, their eyes uncommunicative and intuned. Some of the younger ones laughed or catcalled uncertainly. He was obviously in difficulties. He kept stopping, holding his head, looking round as if he wondered where he was. I went after him. Suddenly he wobbled over to the edge of the pavement, got down on his knees, and began to vomit almost carefully into the gutter. People from the bus queues on the steps of the Free Trade Hall moved hesitantly toward him. He looked lonely and embarrassed, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief, blinking and grinning up into the light that was causing him so much pain. “What can I do, Lucas?” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“Just piss off.”

Twenty or thirty people now surrounded us. At the front stood the women from the bus stop, clutching their shopping bags and umbrellas, a ring of greyish anxious faces. Behind them men from the car showrooms and drawing offices

struggled quietly for a better view. What was the matter? It was a car accident: it was two men fighting. A woman had fainted. It was a dog. Lucas squirmed about, moaning with pain, squinting up at them as they discussed him, screwing up the flesh round his eyes against the migrainous, coronal light that flared round their heads. Then, quite suddenly, the headache seemed to leave him. He shoved me away and jumped lightly to his feet. He looked more relaxed and healthy than I had ever seen him.

“What do you know of Egnaro?” he demanded in a loud and scornful voice.

Surprised and puzzled, the crowd drew back from him. This seemed to amuse him. He laughed, and spat in the gutter.

“What will you *ever* know?” he pressed them.

Some of them shook their heads. He winked horribly at the women, grinned at the men. They backed off further, but he had their attention.

“You,” he went on, “with your supermarket tunes and your Wimpey houses! You with your *insurance policies*!”

He darted forward, ransacked briefly some woman’s shopping while she stared helplessly on, and held up a packet of ‘Daz’. “You,” he accused triumphantly, “with your Blue Whitener!”

He sneered at them; he imitated their favourite T.V. personalities; his effect on them was astonishing.

“If you want to know about the Golden Land,” he challenged them, “you must *go there!*” The schoolchildren worked their way forward through the crush and gazed up at Mm. He regarded them indulgently. “You must suffer as I have,” he told them, “in its swamps! You must itch with its fevers and yellow rashes, tremble on its lee shores, wade through its foetid deltas until your feet rot on your legs!”

The children cheered.

Lucas shook his finger in admonition. He put his hands on his hips.

“I know you!” he cried. “You whisper that word among yourselves when you think I can’t hear! But dare you speak it aloud? Dare you?”

I hadn’t any idea what to do for him. In the end I abandoned him there with his puzzled but enchanted audience: a fat latter-day Errol Flynn or Mario Lanza, recruiting for some trumpery, desperate expedition against the Incas among the crumbling jungles of Hollywood’s ‘new’ world. His eyes were flashing, his curly hair was plastered to his forehead, he had gone insane. As I walked off I thought, ‘He’s spent his life exploiting their fantasies to subsidise his own. This is his punishment.’ I was quite wrong.

“That place is not for you!” I heard him cry, and they groaned. “That place is for dreamers!”

One word hung in the air above him, heavy with promise yet bubbling and buoyant, a marvellous word sparkling with mystery and force: he had only to open his mouth and it would speak itself. A policeman was approaching the crowd from the direction of St Peter's Square.

That was four months ago. I did not see Lucas again until yesterday, although for a while I made regular visits to Peter Street, hoping he might be drawn back to the scene of his failure. What I expected of him I don't know: that he should recover from his breakdown, I suppose, and begin again—he had, after all, paid me in cash. I imagined him in the dirty streets behind Woolworths or the Ardwick Centre, trying to raise finance among the market stalls and pet shops where he had begun his career, two patches of black sweat growing steadily under the arms of his safari suit as his peculiar splay-footed walk carried him from disappointment to disappointment. But the place remained deserted (it was to reopen much later as an extension of Halfords' already profitable bicycle department); Lucas seemed to vanish into his own fiction; and all I could do was stare at my own reflection in the cracked plate glass.

At about this time I began to have my own intimations of Egnaro.

There was nothing original about my seduction; it was dismally similar to Lucas's own, except that it began with a dream.

I was standing in a high narrow room with white walls. It was very hot; but in through the room's single window came the sound of trickling water, and those scents which water draws from dry vegetation. There was a thin thread of music, one figure repeated over and over again on some stringed instrument. I went to the window but the view was blocked by a tree. All I could see through its shiny, fat leaves was a blur of sunlight. Where a ray of light penetrated this curious foliage, it filled the room with a dusty glow the colour of rose petals; from this I deduced that the sun was sinking. Standing in that room, soothed by its proportions although I knew I was in some country so foreign I could not imagine it; hearing that string-figure endlessly repeated; I felt assuaged and yet excited, as if by a premonition of future happiness. I heard someone begin to say,

“Comfort us now & in the hour of our deaths.”

When I woke it was with an unbearable pang of nostalgia. Boarding the train at Stockport that morning I heard a woman say distinctly, “The coast, they claim, is a must at this time of year,” and I knew I was lost. Since then I have kept a little notebook. The popular advertisements are full of clues. One shows a tiger running in slow motion across a heartbreakingly beautiful landscape of sand dunes; another,

for banking services, a horse splashing through shallows. I record them all.

Like Lucas I have ransacked the atlases and encyclopaedias, finding nothing. Unlike him I have visited the great seaports: London, Glasgow, Liverpool. By Southampton Water I sat down and wept; the wind was full of the sound of foreign voices, the scent of foreign fruit; I was dizzy with expectation. But no great fleet is gathering. Nothing can be seen of the great preparations which haunted Lucas and which now haunt me. In the governmental buildings near St James's Park, they look blankly at you if you mention Egnaro; in the offices of the Geographical Society they can tell you nothing. And yet somewhere they are gutting the records of old expeditions; repairing ancient maps; cross-examining old sailors who—three days battered by ice and gales in 1942 under the Southern Cross, hunted by some lean German raider—saw, or only thought they saw, a smudge of land on a heaving horizon, a ripple of white ice cliffs out from which may flow that current of warm, fresh, mysterious water ...

I am able to see myself quite clearly on these useless journeys, these errands run on behalf of my own imagination: but I cannot stop: and I understand now why Lucas had such difficulty in describing his condition. It is like inhabiting two worlds at once.

As I take my first hesitant steps away from the seashore, setting out through the shattered limestone hinterlands into the deep interior of the mystery, I begin to feel a need for reassurance—for an exchange of maps and notes—for some dialogue with those who have made the journey before me. Yesterday, on an impulse, I went back to the Lucky Lotus, that staging-post or coaling-port on the way to Egnaro. I suppose I had known all along that I would find him there when I needed him. He was sitting at his table in the alcove, putting bits of sweet and sour pork into his mouth while he read the paper folded alongside his plate.

“Oh, hello,” he said. “I was just thinking about you.” And when I had ordered my food he began talking about himself.

He had been to America, he said, since getting his affairs in order. If he was a bit fatter, that was why. New partners—he didn’t want to be specific at this stage—had paid off most of his old debts, and he was ready to start a new business. America had opened his eyes. “Fast food,” he said. “That’s where the real money is. Hamburgers. Bloody hell, you should see the way they do it over there!” It was like a production line. You took the customers’ money, passed them through the system as quickly as possible, and ejected them at the other end. “They hardly have time to get the muck down them before they’re out on the street again and the next lot are coming in!” It was wonderful, “Fast food, that’s where it is.”

I watched him eat his rice pudding and custard, smacking his lips

appreciatively, nodding and winking at the waitresses. I noticed that he had replaced his old leather briefcase with a brand new plastic one. He used the word ‘secret’ constantly. “The secret’s in the condiments,” he would say: “Give them onion relish and they’ll eat anything.” And: “In and out fast, that’s the secret.” He had a second liqueur; he seemed quite willing to stay and talk. He asked me if I would like to get in on the ground floor of fast food with him, and I said I would. He didn’t turn the conversation to old times, and I suspected he would have resisted me if I had. I sat listening to his new dreams, watching the hands of the clock.

“Well,” he said eventually. “Time to push off I suppose.”

I still had not brought myself to ask. I knew now how he had felt every time he took out *The Castles of the Kings* and offered it to some puzzled travelling salesman. I watched the waitresses surround him—twittering “Costa’ costa’ costa’,” like little drab birds—as he got up to go, and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. He paid the bill with a credit card. We walked along Deansgate and down Peter Street towards the cab rank outside the Midland Hotel. As we passed the shop, with its mended window and brand new ‘Halfords’ sign, I managed to say:

“By the way. All that ‘Egnaro’ stuff—”

For a moment he looked puzzled. Then he laughed. “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “I’ve finished with all that. I can’t think why I made so much fuss. It’s nothing at all when you know, is it?”

I knew then that if I reached out I would touch some transparent membrane which had grown up between us to protect the secret. I nodded hopelessly. “That’s fine,” I said. “Good.” I arranged to meet him again soon. I arranged to meet his backers. I walked away, and later caught my train. I shan’t see him again. Old maps are useless.

I confess to you now as Lucas confessed to me under the coats in the Lucky Lotus last February—out of fear, out of puzzlement, out of loneliness.

Wherever I am I think about it: whatever I do is tainted by it: but if you were to ask me what Egnaro is I could give you no answer. In my most despairing moments I believe that the human race exists solely to give it expression. No-one, I suspect, can have any clear understanding of it. All events are its signature: none are. It does not exist: yet it is quite real. The secret is meaningless before you know it: and, judging by what has happened to Lucas, worthless when you do. If Egnaro is the substrate of mystery which underlies all daily life, then the reciprocal of this is also true, and it is the exact dead point of ordinariness which lies beneath every mystery.

On 202 by Jeff Hecht

When “On 202” appeared in The Twilight Zone Magazine, editor T.E.D. Klein stated that Jeff Hecht “pulls the extraordinary feat of mentioning Jimi Hendrix and H.P. Lovecraft in the same story.” Cosmic, my dear Klein.

Jeff Hecht was born May 30, 1947 in Milford, Connecticut and immediately was hauled off on a nomadic existence across the northeast, attending fourteen schools in twelve years before heading west to Caltech in 1965. There he received a B.S. in electronic engineering, then returned to the east for two years of grad school in higher education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. During this period, Hecht writes: “I lived in the back of a barn in Haydenville, Massachusetts, a little town marked by a gas station, a post office, and a flashing yellow light and ‘Thickly Settled’ sign on the highway. I discovered the emptiness of Route 202 while on the way from Haydenville to substitute teach in a somewhat larger western Massachusetts town.”

Hecht now resides in a suburb of Boston, where for seven years he was managing editor of Laser Focus, a trade magazine about lasers. Since July, 1981 he has been a full-time freelance writer. He is co-author of Laser: Super Tool for the ’80s, a popular level book about lasers published this spring, as well as numerous technical articles. Hecht has also published fiction in the New Dimensions anthologies and in Datamation, a computer industry trade magazine. None of which explains how Hendrix and Lovecraft can be found together “On 202.”

The leaves skittered across the road as the cold November wind blew out of the western Massachusetts hills. They were a familiar sight to Sandy, but the first time the headlights of the old Volvo caught them, Wayne started to brake the car and stalled the engine. He muttered an obscenity.

“Why did you do that? You’re going to get us stuck out here,” Sandy grumbled. “I told you we should have stayed the night in Amherst.” Even though they were both tired and it was nearly midnight before they’d left Sandy’s friends’ apartment, Wayne had insisted on making the two-hour trip to her parents’ home in Lowell that night.

“There were animals running across the road,” Wayne replied as he shifted into neutral and steered the slowing car toward the side of the road. The engine

caught, and he shifted back into drive. “Didn’t you see them? They were little dark things, rats I think.” He accelerated and pulled the car back toward the middle of the empty road.

“They were just leaves, blown by the wind. It’s something you never see in California.”

“Then I’m glad I missed them. California’s always had everything I wanted.”

“Except me.”

“Sometimes I wonder about that.”

It was an old line of banter that, like many other things, was souring on them both, but Wayne’s twisting of it hurt Sandy. The trip had been her idea—she’d wanted to visit family and friends back East, and hoped that the trip would help bring her and Wayne back together. But nothing had gone right; even the old car she’d brought West with her years ago was dying. “Come on, Wayne. You agreed to come back with me. You said you wanted to see the East, remember?”

“Yeah, I guess I did. There was nothing better to do. But it’s so damn alien here.”

Sandy stared out the windshield, trying to find a way to snap Wayne out of his foul mood. The wind was picking up, bringing with it some snowflakes which were settling on the empty road that would take them to Pelham, where they would pick up Route 202 and drive north for miles to Route 2, then to Route 495, and finally into Lowell. She knew the route well from her college years, but she’d never taken it so late at night.

In the silence, Wayne reached over and turned on the radio. He punched two buttons and got only static, but the third brought Jimi Hendrix’s voice into the car: “... Two riders were approaching, and the wind began to howl ...” The last word echoed down the road with them and the wind, then faded back into static as they went down a hill.

Sandy shuddered. “Turn it off, Wayne, please.”

“Why? I like it; I haven’t heard it in ages.”

“It bothers me. Hendrix has been dead for ten years now. To hear him now is like ... like a ghost singing.”

Wayne laughed. “Don’t be silly. It’s just electronics, just music. It’s grooves on a record being translated electromechanically into signals that can make a speaker move. There’s nothing supernatural about it.” He stared out into the thickening snow. “The only thing that’s spooky around here is the country.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s strange, that’s all. Ancient and foreboding and now ...” he pointed to the bare trees beside the road, “... barren.”

“You call this barren after living around Los Angeles?” Sandy thought of the

scraggly shrubs that failed to cover the dry soil of the Angeles National Forest, and of the sandy desert east of San Bernardino.

"No, I mean empty, menacing. You remember that book we read by Lovecraft? He lived in New England, and this is his kind of country. Even the names match. I remember the name of one of his characters—Whateley, Wilbur Whateley. There's a town named after him. We drove through it, remember?"

"The town spells it differently—W-h-a-t-e-l-y. Lovecraft had an extra *e* in it. I checked."

Wayne shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It's still a horror-story kind of place, a dark and sleepy town that time and the highway passed by."

Sandy watched the snowflakes as she tried to sort through her thoughts. "I don't understand." She saw a single light on the hillside; outside of their headlights it seemed to be the only light in the world. "Why does it bother you?"

"It's empty, it's ..." he groped for words. "Well, I can't really find the words, but it's just not right."

"For God's sake, Wayne, it sounds like you're taking those old horror stories seriously!"

He turned from the road and looked at her. "So how many horror stories have they written about Los Angeles?" They came up over a hill and saw a handful of lights among the snowflakes and the dark houses of Pelham. "Look, Sandy," he stated, but was interrupted by John Lennon singing from the radio: "All we are saying, is give peace a chance."

Sandy shivered. "Please turn it off."

"But it's good music ... great music. It takes me back to the good years, back when the Movement was alive."

"Lennon is dead," she said, realizing as the words came from her mouth that they would have no more impact than reminding Wayne that the Movement had died, too. He had never been able to cope with that reality, and music had become his way of tuning out the world. At times—often when she was out working—he would sit for hours listening over headphones. "Just listening," he would say when she came home and asked. He insisted that the only reason he used the headphones was that they sounded better than the speakers, but she suspected that he really was trying to keep his beloved old music to himself. Perhaps he wanted to slip back a decade to when the music was being made, and to when he wasn't the only one drifting aimlessly through life.

Wayne shifted into neutral and kept his foot on the gas while braking for the flashing red light at the end of the road. It wasn't the best treatment for an automatic transmission, but it was the only way they'd found to keep the car from stalling when they slowed it. This time it worked.

"We don't have to worry about that again for a while," Sandy said as they coasted through the left turn and Wayne began accelerating on Route 202. "It's probably twenty miles before the next stop light."

"That far?"

"There's not much out this way. We're going through the watershed of the Quabbin Reservoir—Boston's water supply. There aren't any houses for miles." They were out of the village of Pelham before they realized it. The snow was coming down heavily now, and Wayne eased off the gas. With the snow blowing outside and the speedometer light out, Sandy couldn't estimate their speed. The trees seemed to meet overhead at places, and it looked as if they were driving through an endless tunnel defined by their headlights.

Wayne stared out into the snow, trying to see the road. "The snow's early, isn't it?"

"A little. But it does this sometimes." The sad, flabby voice of Elvis Presley sang meaningless words in the background. Sandy tuned them out automatically.

"It's a desolate land, Sandy, and these are desolate times." Wayne's voice seemed remote, as if he was speaking from the other end of a tunnel rather than from the other side of the car. "The music helps me hold off the worst of it, lets me try to recapture the magic that's gone. Sometimes it seems like I'm the only one left who remembers it all, you know, like everybody else had forgotten peace and love and copped out and voted for Ronnie Reagan ..."

"What do you mean?" Sandy kept her question short, hoping it would keep Wayne from drifting back into the silent brooding that she dreaded the most.

"Even the music has become a big business. Take Elvis ... or Lennon. What did they say Lennon was worth when that guy shot him—two hundred million? What did he do to deserve all of that? And how many people could he have fed with his money?"

It was a familiar tirade. Wayne had always been jealous of people who had money because he wished he had some, and Sandy told him so once again. She didn't expect him to become a businessman, but there were times that she did get tired of supporting him.

"It's not the money, dammit, it's the waste. Lennon and Yoko rode around in chauffeured Rolls Royces while people starved to death. And look at your friends out there in that little town with all that land. They have a great big lawn, some pasture for a couple of horses, and forty acres of woods. That land could be feeding people like it used to. Now it's covered by the darkness of the forest because the rich think it's pretty."

The tone of the words scared Sandy. "That soil is awfully rocky, Wayne; you can't farm it very well."

“But people did a hundred years ago. That quaint little house used to be a farmhouse that housed real working people, and those woods used to be a farm that gave them a living. Your friends seemed so proud of that. Why waste land that could be used? Why hand it over to the darkness of the forest?”

“What’s the matter with the forest? We need trees; they can be lovely ...”

“They cut out the sun and hide the light. The forest breeds bugs and decay and disease ...”

“That’s where you had your bad trip, wasn’t it. Out in the woods in Oregon somewhere? You’re not getting a flashback now, are you? Not after all these years?”

Wayne stared through the windshield at the tunnel of snow illuminated by the cold light of the headlamps. “No.” He seemed to be switching his attention back to the road. The wind had died down, and enough of the heavy snow had accumulated to make the surface slippery.

The distorted voice of a disk jockey cut through the static, a strange voice that Sandy felt sure she’d heard years before. “In Enfield this is WEND, 666 on your AM dial. That’s the number of the beast, folks, you come to it and it comes to you, via the miracle of Mr. Marconi and others long dead. And you’re listening to the voices of the dead tonight ...”

Sandy leaned forward and punched another button on the radio. There was only static.

“Turn it back. I want to hear it.”

“It fits your mood tonight, doesn’t it? Voices of the dead from the dead past.”

“Come on, dammit. I’m driving; I can pick what I want to listen to. I need it to keep awake—you’re not going to find anything else on the air out here at this hour, are you?”

“I thought you wanted to talk.”

“I did, for a while.” He reached over to the radio and pushed the button that brought the music back. Jim Morrison’s voice was singing: “Break ... break ... break on through ... to the other side.” Wayne turned the volume up.

“What’s the matter?” Sandy asked, but Wayne didn’t seem to hear her. She forced her voice to shout, trying to make herself heard over the music. “Turn it down!” When there was no response, she did. Wayne appeared to frown at her, but it was hard to be sure. With the dashboard lights out, the only light inside the car was the reflection of the headlights from the snow, and the feeble blue glow of the high-beam indicator. While she was looking at him, Wayne switched to low beams.

“Damn snow freaks me out,” he muttered. “I can’t see much out there, just the snowflakes and the darkness. The trees look like claws reaching into the night. I

wish I was back in California."

Sandy turned her eyes to the heavy snow. The latticework of flakes drifting to the ground, dancing in front of the windshield, drew her attention. After she strained for a while, she could focus her eyes on the road. The car seemed to be crawling, probably going only about ten miles an hour. "Do you want me to drive? I can see in this ..."

"No," Wayne snapped. "You said you were tired, and I told you I'd get you there."

"What about stopping?"

"We'd freeze out here."

"Maybe in Orange or Athol. There's got to be a motel somewhere around there. You're not going to make it this way, you know."

Wayne said nothing as the song drew to its crescendo and closed. He was being drawn into the music as Sandy had seen a hundred times before. He was nodding his head to it; she couldn't see his face, but she saw his head silhouetted against the snow. Jim Croce began singing "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown."

Wayne settled down for a moment. "It's the newest one they've played all night."

"It's not that new. Croce died years ago." Sandy couldn't remember when Croce's plane had crashed; it had faded into the haze that she identified as the middle seventies. "All the disco bands picked it up and turned it into mush."

Wayne was looking out into the snow, still bobbing his head faintly to the music. "It's good music, Sandy. Croce was one of the greats. I'd like to hear him now, you know, him and the others. But so many of them are gone—Hendrix and Elvis and Lennon and Morrison and ..."

"Can you see where you're going, Wayne?"

"Of course not, not in this snow."

"Then let me drive. You're too tired, too far spaced out on something. You were smoking grass before we left, weren't you?"

"I'm okay," Wayne replied without taking his eyes from the falling snow. "You couldn't do any better in this mess. I'll make it ... I always have."

Sandy didn't see how Wayne could see the road through the snow. They seemed to be alone in a world of whiteness, drifting through the space defined by their headlights. She hadn't seen another car moving since they'd left Amherst, but she wasn't surprised by that. The natives knew better than to drive on a country road in a nighttime snowstorm. And even if Route 202 was a U.S. highway, it was still a country road. "I'm scared," she said.

"So am I. I see the dark out there, I see the cold. I see things lurking in the trees, waiting for us. I see snow that would trap us here and freeze us to death. I

see time, I see emptiness. I've never sensed an emptiness like this before. Even when we drove across the desert, it was on an interstate highway full of trucks and cars and at night there were at least other headlights. But this ..." Wayne's voice drifted away as the disk jockey returned. "... not the Grateful Dead, this night or ever here on Enfield Radio WEND, just the ungrateful dead ..." "Snap out of it, please, Wayne!" Sandy tried to shout, but the car seemed to muffle the words.

"... Janis Joplin," were the disk jockey's words, tumbling out of the speaker. "You remember how she overdosed and they found her and we were all so scared that death had come to our beautiful world ..." "Wayne!"

"I can see the road now, Sandy. Don't worry, don't worry. I can steer across the trackless waste between the vampire trees."

Sandy closed her eyes, bowed her head, and made the sign of the cross on her breast. It was the first time in years, since her grandmother had dragged her to church a few days after her seventeenth birthday. She tried to recapture the strand of faith that she'd let slip from her hands years before, tried to shut her eyes and ears to the outside and to pray.

Joplin's words drifted her into awareness—"Me and Bobby McGee," a song that had always reminded Sandy of people that once had been precious to her but now were gone. When the familiar voice of the dead woman she had never met came to the words "I let him slip away," Sandy broke into sobs. She thought of losing Wayne, and before him of losing Michael and Barney and Andy. She thought of her grandmother and her uncle Bill, both alive when she'd left Massachusetts, now both dead. She thought of the 4 A.M. phone call from her mother, begging her to come back home and see her grandmother before she died and how, standing naked in the tiny apartment in the cool California morning, she had begged off, trying to avoid telling her mother or admitting to herself how shaken she was.

As her tears began to subside, the music drifted back into her awareness. It was Morrison's voice again, louder than before and badly distorted: "This is the end, my only friend, the end ..."

She looked at Wayne. He seemed rigid, hypnotized by the snow, but his arms still moved just enough to steer the car around curves. The flakes were coming at them faster—the car seemed to be speeding up. "Wayne, turn it off!" she demanded. He said nothing; Morrison's ghost voice sang of "a desperate land."

She reached to push a button, but couldn't make the dial move. When she moved her hand toward the volume control, Wayne's hand pushed hers away.

Sandy shivered. "Please, Wayne, please let me turn it off. It's scaring me, it's terrifying me, it's trying to kill me."

"I need it on." His voice was flat, almost calm except for its rigidity. "I can't see where I'm going without it." He steered the car around a curve and up a hill.

Sandy couldn't make herself believe that he knew what he was doing. In front of the car, she saw only snowflakes; to the side she knew there must be trees. She crossed herself, not recognizing the motion until she'd completed it. She tried to pray, to force the music out of her awareness, to push away Morrison's dead plea: "Ride the snake, he's old and his skin is cold ..."

The song evoked the fears that had haunted Sandy in the lonely, desolate years a decade earlier. It made her remember her last night with Barney, of lying sleeplessly beside him with the song haunting her long after the record had ended and the turntable shut itself off, leaving her alone with the silence and the certainty that she never wanted to see Barney again.

She prayed, trying to hold herself away from tears and the music. The words reached again for her attention after the long instrumental passage ended. A phrase touched her: "It hurts to set you free, but you'll never follow me." She would follow Wayne no more; she'd stay in Massachusetts and have someone send her things back from California.

"This ..." the refrain repeated in the last line seemed to drag on forever and "... is ..." tried to seize her, although "... the ..." words were deceptively soft. The last of them "... ennnnnd ..." stretched on to the end of the world as she tried to flee from it.

The force of the impact threw her against the seat and shoulder belts and knocked her unconscious.

She woke as two men in hunting jackets bundled her into a blanket. One was big and paunchy, an awkward man trying to handle her gently. The other was thinner and looked about twenty years older. "Does it hurt anywhere?" the older man asked when he saw her eyes were open.

She ignored the pain in her chest. "Wayne ... what about Wayne?"

"The man in the car?" he asked, then realized that he didn't have to ask. "I'm afraid ... afraid he's dead, ma'am."

"He's messed up real bad ... stuck in there," the younger man said as they eased her into the back seat of their big old car.

Sandy cried then, cried as the older man laid something more over her, and cried as they started the car and drove on in the night. Much later, when she got control of herself, she asked them where Enfield was.

"Nothing there anymore, ma'am," the older man replied. "They drowned it

more than forty years ago; it's under the Quabbin."

"There's an Enfield in Connecticut, Dad, down by Hartford," the younger man added.

Sandy heard him, but it didn't matter anymore.

THE TRICK by Ramsey Campbell

In twenty years of writing, Ramsey Campbell has written some 175 short stories, most of which have seen publication in a wide range of magazines, anthologies and fanzines. Campbell has the distinction of having appeared in all but one of the DAW series Year's Best Horror Stories to date—this under three different editors, proving there is no personal bias in these selections.

The avowed intention of this series is to present the best horror stories published each year. Breaking an unwritten rule that requires an editor to include only one story by a given author in an anthology (unless under a pseudonym), The Year's Best Horror Stories has on three previous occasions included two stories by the same author in the same collection. Those authors have been Harlan Ellison, Brian Lumley, and Ramsey Campbell. With almost a dozen new stories published during 1981, Ramsey Campbell has again written two of the best horror stories of the year.

"The Trick" appeared in the ill-fated attempt to revive Weird Tales as a paperback series. Its title was changed without the author's knowledge, and at Campbell's request I have restored his title (and corrected the spelling of his name) for its appearance here.

As October waned Debbie forgot about the old witch; she didn't associate her with Hallowe'en. Hallowe'en wasn't frightening. After the long depression following the summer holidays, it was the first of the winter excitements: not as good as Guy Fawkes' Night or Christmas, but still capable of excluding less pleasant things from Debbie's mind—the sarcastic teacher, the gangs of boys who leaned against the shops, the old witch.

Debbie wasn't really frightened of her, not at her age. Even years ago, when Debbie was a little kid, she hadn't found her terrifying. Not like some things: not like her feverish night when the dark in her bedroom had grown like mould on the furniture, making the familiar chair and wardrobe soft and huge. Nor like the face that had looked in her bedroom window once, when she was ill: a face like a wrinkled monkey's, whose jaw drooped as if melting, lower and lower; a face that had spoken to her in a voice that sagged as the face did—a voice that must have been a car's engine struggling to start.

The witch had never seized Debbie with panic, as those moments had. Perhaps

she was only an old woman, after all. She lived in a terraced house, in the row opposite Debbie's home. People owned their houses in that row, but Debbie's parents only rented the top half of a similar building. They didn't like the old woman; nobody did.

Whenever children played outside her house she would come out to them. "Can't you make your row somewhere else? Haven't you got a home to go to?" "We're playing outside our own house," someone might say. "You don't own the street." Then she would stand and stare at them, with eyes like grey marbles. The fixed lifeless gaze always made them uneasy; they would dawdle away, jeering.

Parents were never sympathetic. "Play somewhere else, then," Debbie's father would say. Her parents were more frightened of the witch than she was. "Isn't her garden awful," she'd once heard her mother saying. "It makes the whole street look like a slum. But we mustn't say anything, we're only tenants." Debbie thought that was just an excuse.

Why were they frightened? The woman was small, hardly taller than Debbie. Boys didn't like to play near her house in case they had to rescue a football, to grope through the slimy nets, tall as a child, of weeds and grass full of crawlers. But that was only nasty, not frightening. Debbie wasn't even sure why the woman was supposed to be a witch.

Perhaps it was her house. "Keep away from my house," she told nearby children when she went out, as though they would want to go near the drab unpainted crumbling house that was sinking into its own jungle. The windows were cracked and thick with grime; when the woman's face peered out it looked like something pale stirring in a dirty jar. Sometimes children stood outside shouting and screaming to make the face loom. Boys often dared each other to peer in, but rarely did. Perhaps that was it, then: her house looked like a witch's house. Sometimes black smoke that looked solid as oil dragged its long swollen body from the chimney.

There were other things. Animals disliked her almost as much as she disliked them. Older brothers said that she went out after midnight, hurrying through the mercury-vapour glare toward the derelict streets across the main road; but older brothers often made up stories. When Debbie tried to question her father he only told her not to be stupid. "Who's been wasting your time with that?"

The uncertainty annoyed her. If the woman were a witch she must be in retirement; she didn't do anything. Much of the time—at least, during the day—she stayed in her house: rarely answering the door, and then only to peer through a crack and send the intruder away. What did she do, alone in the dark house? Sometimes people odder than herself would visit her: a tall thin woman with glittering wrists and eyes, who dressed in clothes like tapestries of lurid flame;

two fat men, Tweedledum and Tweedledee draped in lethargically flapping black cloaks. They might be witches too.

“Maybe she doesn’t want anyone to know she’s a witch,” suggested Debbie’s friend Sandra. Debbie didn’t really care. The old woman only annoyed her, as bossy adults did. Besides, Hallowe’en was coming. Then, on Hallowe’en morning—just when Debbie had managed to forget her completely—the woman did the most annoying thing of all.

Debbie and Sandra had wheeled their prams to the supermarket, feeling grown-up. On the way they’d met Lucy, who never acted her age. When Lucy had asked “Where are you taking your dolls?” Sandra had replied loftily “We aren’t taking our *dolls* anywhere.” She’d done the shopping each Saturday morning since she was nine, so that her mother could work. Often she shopped in the evenings, because her mother was tired after work, and then Debbie would accompany her, so that she felt less uneasy in the crowds beneath the white glare. This Saturday morning Debbie was shopping too.

The main road was full of crowds trying to beat the crowds. Boys sat like a row of shouting ornaments on the railing above the underpass; women queued a block for cauliflowers, babies struggled screaming in prams. The crowds flapped as a wind fumbled along the road. Debbie and Sandra manoeuvred their prams to the supermarket. A little girl was racing a trolley through the aisles, jumping on the back for a ride. How childish. Debbie thought.

When they emerged Sandra said, “Let’s walk to the tunnel and back.”

She couldn’t be anxious to hurry home to vacuum the flat. They wheeled their laden prams toward the tunnel, which fascinated them. A railway cutting divided the streets a few hundred yards beyond the supermarket, in the derelict area. Houses crowded both its banks, their windows and doorways blinded and gagged with boards. From the cutting, disused railway lines probed into a tunnel beneath the main road—and never reappeared, so far as Debbie could see.

The girls pushed their prams down an alley, to the near edge of the cutting. Beside them the remains of back yards were cluttered with fragments of brick. The cutting was rather frightening, in a delicious way. Rusty metal skeletons sat tangled unidentifiably among the lines, soggy cartons flapped sluggishly, a door lay as though it led to something in the soil. Green sprouted minutely between scatterings of rubble.

Debbie stared down at the tunnel, at the way it burrowed into the dark beneath the earth. Within the mouth was only a shallow rim, surrounding thick darkness. No: now she strained her eyes she made out a further arch of dimmer brick, cut short by the dark. As she peered another formed, composed as much of darkness as of brick. Beyond it she thought something pale moved. The surrounding

daylight flickered with Debbie's peering; she felt as though she were being drawn slowly into the tunnel. What was it, the pale feeble stirring? She held onto a broken wall, so as to lean out to peer; but a voice startled her away.

"Go on. Keep away from there." It was the old witch, shouting from the main road, just as though they were little kids. To Debbie she looked silly: her head poked over the wall above the tunnel, as if someone had put a turnip there to grimace at them.

"We're all right," Sandra called impatiently. "We know what we're doing." They wouldn't have gone too near the cutting; years ago a little boy had run into the tunnel and had never been seen again.

"Just do as you're told. Get away." The head hung above the wall, staring hatefully at them, looking even more like a turnip.

"Oh, let's go home," Debbie said. "I don't want to stay here now, anyway."

They wheeled their prams around the chunks that littered the street. At the main road the witch was waiting for them. Her face frowned, glaring from its perch above the small black tent of her coat. Little more of her was visible; scuffed black snouts poked from beneath the coat, hands lurked in her drooping sleeves; one finger was hooked around the cane of a tattered umbrella. "And keep away from there in future," she said harshly.

"Why, is that your house?" Debbie muttered.

"That's where she keeps her bats' eyes."

"What's that?" The woman's grey eyebrows writhed up, threatening. Her head looked like an old apple, Debbie thought, with mould for eyebrows and tufts of dead grass stuck on top. "What did you just say?" the woman shouted.

She was repeating herself into a fury when she was interrupted. Debbie tried not to laugh. Sandra's dog Mop was the interruption; he must have jumped out of Sandra's back yard. He was something like a stumpy-legged terrier, black and white and spiky. Debbie liked him, even though he'd once run away with her old teddy bear, her favourite, and had returned empty-mouthing. Now he ran around Sandra, bouncing up at her; he ran toward the cutting and back again, barking.

The witch didn't like him, nor did he care for her. Once he had run into her grass only to emerge with his tail between his legs, while she watched through the grime, smiling like a skull. "Keep that insect away from here, as well," she shouted.

She shook her umbrella at him; it fluttered dangling like a sad broomstick. At once Mop pounced at it, barking. The girls tried to gag themselves with their knuckles, but vainly. Their laughter boiled up; they stood snorting helplessly, weeping with mirth.

The woman drew herself up rigidly; bony hands crept from her sleeves. The

wizened apple turned slowly to Sandra, then to Debbie. The mouth was a thin bloodless slit full of teeth; the eyes seemed to have congealed around hatred. "Well, you shouldn't have called him an insect," Debbie said defensively.

Cars rushed by, two abreast. Shoppers hurried past, glancing at the woman and the two girls. Debbie could seize none of these distractions; she could see only the face. It wasn't a fruit or a vegetable now, it was a mask that had once been a face, drained of humanity. Its hatred was cold as a shark's gaze. Even the smallness of the face wasn't reassuring; it concentrated its power.

Mop bounced up and poked at the girls. At last they could turn; they ran. Their prams yawned. At the supermarket they looked back. The witch hadn't moved; the wizened mask stared above the immobile black coat. They stuck out their tongues, then they stalked home, nudging each other into nonchalance. "She's only an old fart," Debbie dared to say. In the street they stood and made faces at her house for minutes.

It wasn't long before Sandra came to ask Debbie to play. She couldn't have vacuumed so quickly, but perhaps she felt uneasy alone in the house. They played rounders in the street, with Lucy and her younger brother. Passing cars took sides.

When Debbie saw the witch approaching, a seed of fear grew in her stomach. But she was almost outside her own house; she needn't be afraid, even if the witch made faces at her again. Sandra must have thought similarly, for she ran across the pavement almost in front of the witch.

The woman didn't react; she seemed hardly to move. Only the black coat stirred a little as she passed, carrying her mask of hatred as though bearing it carefully somewhere, for a purpose. Debbie shouted for the ball; her voice clattered back from the houses, sounding false as her bravado.

As the witch reached her gate Miss Bake from the flats hurried over, blue hair glinting, hands fluttering. "Oh, have they put the fire out?"

The witch peered suspiciously at her. "I really couldn't tell you."

"Haven't you heard?" This indifference made her more nervous; her voice leapt and shook. "Some boys got into the houses by the supermarket and started a fire. That's what they told me at the corner. They must have put it out. Isn't it wicked, Miss Trodden. They never used to do these things. You can't feel safe these days, can you?"

"Oh yes, I think I can."

"You can't mean that, Miss Trodden. Nobody's safe, not with all these children. If they're so bored, why doesn't someone give them something to do? The churches should. They could find them something worth doing. Someone's got to make the country safe for the old folk."

"Which churches are those?" She was smirking faintly.

Miss Bake drew back a little. "All the churches," she said, trying to placate her. "All the Christians. They should work together, form a coalition."

"Oh, them. They've had their chance." She smirked broadly. "Don't you worry. Someone will take control. I must be going."

Miss Bake hurried away, frowning and tutting; her door slammed. Shortly the witch's face appeared behind the grimy panes, glimmering as though twilight came earlier to her house. Her expression lurked in the dimness, unreadable.

When Debbie's father called her in, she could tell that her parents had had an argument; the flat was heavy with dissatisfaction. "When are you going trick-or-treating?" her mother demanded.

"Tonight. After tea."

"Well, you're not. You've to go before it's dark."

The argument was poised to pounce on Debbie. "Oh, all right," she said grumpily.

After lunch she washed up. Her father dabbed at the plates, then sat watching football. He fiddled irritably with the controls, but the flesh of the players grew orange. Her mother kept swearing at food as she prepared it. Debbie read her love comics, and tried to make herself invisible with silence. Through the wall she could hear the song of the vacuum droning about the flat in the next house.

Eventually it faded, and Sandra came knocking. "You'd better go now," Debbie's mother said.

"We're not going until tonight."

"I'm sorry, Sandra, Debbie has to go before it's dark. And you aren't to go to anyone we don't know."

"Oh, why not?" Sandra protested. Trying to trick strangers was part of the excitement. "We won't go in," Debbie said.

"Because you're not to, that's why."

"Because some people have been putting things in sweets," Debbie's father said wearily, hunching forward toward the television. "Drugs and things. It was on the News."

"You go with them," her mother told him, worried again. "Make sure they're all right."

"What's stopping you?"

"You'll cook the tea, will you?"

"My mother might go," Sandra said. "But I think she's too tired."

"Oh God, all right, I'll go. When the match is finished." He slumped back in his armchair; the mock leather sighed. "Never any bloody rest," he muttered.

By the time they began it was dark, after all. But the streets weren't deserted

and dimly exciting; they were full of people hurrying home from the match, shouting to each other, singing. Her father's impatience tugged at Debbie like a leash.

Some of the people they visited were preparing meals, and barely tolerant. Too many seemed anxious to trick them; perhaps they couldn't afford treats. At a teacher's house they had to attempt impossible plastic mazes which even Debbie's father decided irritably that he couldn't solve—though the teacher's wife sneaked them an apple each anyway. Elsewhere, several boys with glowing skulls for faces flung open a front door then slammed it, laughing. Mop appeared from an alley and joined the girls, to bounce at anyone who opened a door. He cheered Debbie, and she had pocketfuls of fruit and sweets. But it was an unsatisfying Hallowe'en.

They were nearly home when Mop began to growl. He balked as they came abreast of the witch's garden. Unwillingly Debbie stared toward the house. The white mercury-vapour glare sharpened the tangled grass; a ragged spiky frieze of shadow lay low on the walls. The house seemed smoky and dim, drained of colour. But she could see the gaping doorway, the coat like a tent of darker shadow, the dim perched face, a hand beckoning. "Come here," the voice said. "I've got something for you."

"Go on, be quick," hissed Debbie's father.

The girls hesitated. "Go on, she won't bite you," he said, pushing Debbie. "Take it while she's offering."

He wanted peace, he wanted her to make friends with the old witch. If she said she was frightened he would only tell her not to be stupid. Now he had made her more frightened to refuse. She dragged her feet up the cracked path, toward the door to shadow. Dangling grasses plucked at her socks, scraping dryly. The house stretched her shadow into its mouth.

Fists like knotted clubs crept from sleeves and deposited something in Debbie's palm, then in Sandra's: wrapped boiled sweets. "There you are," said the shrunken mouth, smiling dimly.

"Thank you very much." Debbie almost screamed: she hadn't heard her father follow her, to thank the woman. His finger was trying to prod her to gratitude.

"Let's see if you like them," the witch said.

Debbie's fingers picked stiffly at the wrapping. The paper rustled like the dead grass, loud and somehow vicious. She raised the bared sweet toward her mouth, wondering whether she could drop it. She held her mouth still around the sweet. But when she could no longer fend off the taste, it was pleasant: raspberry, clear and sharp. "It's nice," she said. "Thank you."

"Yes, it is," Sandra said.

Hearing her voice Mop, who had halted snarling at the far end the path, came racing between the clattering grasses. “We mustn’t forget the dog, must we,” the voice said. Mop overshot his sweet and bounced back to catch it. Sandra made to run to him, but he’d crunched and swallowed the sweet. They turned back to the house. The closed front door faced them in the dimness.

“I’m going home now,” Sandra said and ran into her house, followed by Mop. Debbie found an odd taste in her mouth: a thick bitter trail, as if something had crawled down her throat. Just the liquid centre of the sweet: it wasn’t worth telling her father, he would only be impatient. “Did you enjoy yourself?” he said, tousling her hair, and she nodded.

During the meal her tongue searched for the taste. It was never there, nor could she find it in her memory; perhaps it hadn’t been there at all. She watched comedies on television; she was understanding more of the jokes that made her parents laugh. She tricked some little girls who came to the door, but they looked so forlorn that she gave them sweets. The street was bare, deserted, frosted by the light: the ghost of its daytime self. She was glad to close it out. She watched the screen. Colours bobbed up, laughter exploded; gaps interrupted, for she was falling asleep. “Do you want to go to bed?” She strained to prove she didn’t, but at last admitted to herself that she did. In bed she fell asleep at once.

She slept uneasily. Something kept waking her: a sound, a taste? Straining drowsily to remember, she drifted into sleep. Once she glimpsed a figure staring at her from the doorway—her father. Only seconds later—or so it seemed at first—she woke again. A face had peered in the window. She turned violently, tethered by the blankets. There was nothing but the lighted gap which she always left between the curtains, to keep her company in the dark. The house was silent, asleep.

Her mind streamed with thoughts. The mask on the wizened apple, the skull-faced boys, the street flattened by the glare, her father’s finger prodding her ribs. The face that had peered in her window had been hanging wide, too wide. It was the melting monkey from when she was little. Placing it didn’t reassure her. The house surrounded her, huge and unfamiliar, darkly threatening.

She tried to think of Mop. He ran barking into the tunnel—no, he chased cheekily around the witch. Debbie remembered the day he had run into the witch’s garden. Scared to pursue him, they had watched him vanish amid the grass. They’d heard digging, then a silence: what sounded like a pattering explosion of earth, a threshing of grass, and Mop had run out with his tail between his legs. The dim face had watched, grinning.

That wasn’t reassuring either. She tried to think of something she loved, but could think of nothing but her old bear that Mop had stolen. Her mind became a

maze, leading always back to the face at her window. She'd seen it only once, but she had often felt it peering in. Its jaw had sagged like wax, pulling open a yawning pink throat. She had been ill, she must have been frightened by a monkey making a face on television. But as the mouth had drooped and then drawn up again, she'd heard a voice speaking to her through the glass: a slow deep dragging voice that sagged like the face, stretching out each separate word. She'd lain paralyzed as the voice blurred in the glass, but hadn't been able to make out a word. She opened her eyes to dislodge the memory. A shadow sprang away from the window.

Only a car's light, plucking at the curtains. She lay, trying to be calm around her heart. But she felt uneasy, and kept almost tasting the centre of the burst sweet. The room seemed oppressive; she felt imprisoned. The window imprisoned her, for something could peer in.

She crawled out of bed. The floor felt unpleasantly soft underfoot, as if mouldering in the dark. The street stretched below, deserted and glittering; the witch's windows were black, as though the grime had filled the house. The taste was almost in Debbie's mouth.

Had the witch put something in the sweets? Suddenly Debbie had to know whether Sandra had tasted it too. She had to shake off the oppressively padded darkness. She dressed, fumbling quietly in the dark. Squirming into her anorak, she crept into the hall.

She couldn't leave the front door open, the wind would slam it. She tiptoed into the living-room and groped in her mother's handbag. Her face burned; it skulked dimly in the mirror. She clutched the key in her fist and inched open the door to the stairs.

On the stairs she realized she was behaving stupidly. How could she waken Sandra without disturbing her mother? Sandra's bedroom window faced the back yard, too far from the alley to pelt. Yet her thoughts seemed only a commentary, for she was still descending. She opened the front door, and started. Sandra was waiting beneath the streetlamp.

She was wearing her anorak too. She looked anxious. "Mop's run off," she said.

"Oh no. Shall we look for him?"

"Come on, I know where he is." They muffled their footsteps, which sounded like a dream. The bleached street stood frozen around them, fossilized by the glare; trees cast nets over the houses, cars squatted, closed and dim. The ghost of the street made Debbie dislike to ask, but she had to know. "Do you think she put something funny in those sweets? Did you taste something?"

"Yes, I can now." At once Debbie could too: a brief hint of the indefinable

taste. She hadn't wanted so definite an answer; she bit her lip.

At the main road Sandra turned toward the supermarket. Shops displayed bare slabs of glazed light, plastic cups scuttled in the underpass. How could Sandra be so sure where Mop had gone? Why did Debbie feel she knew as well? Sandra ran past the supermarket. Surely they weren't going to—But Sandra was already running into an alley, toward the cutting.

She gazed down, waiting for Debbie. White lamps glared into the artificial valley; shadows of the broken walls crumbled over scattered bricks. "He won't have gone down there," Debbie said, wanting to believe it

"He has," Sandra cried, "Listen."

The wind wandered groping among the clutter on the tracks, it hooted feebly in the stone throat. Another sound was floated up to Debbie by the wind, then snatched away: a whining?

"He's in the tunnel," Sandra said. "Come on."

She slipped down a few feet; her face stared over the edge at Debbie. "If you don't come you aren't my friend," she said.

Debbie watched her reach the floor of the cutting and stare up challengingly; then reluctantly she followed. A bitter taste rose momentarily in her throat. She slithered down all too swiftly. The dark deep tunnel grew tall.

Why didn't Sandra call? "Mop! Mop!" Debbie shouted. But her shouts dropped into the cutting like pats of mud. There might have been an answering whine; the wind threw the sound away. "Come on," Sandra said impatiently.

She strode into the tunnel. The shadow hanging from the arch chopped her in half, then wiped her out entirely. Debbie remembered the little boy who had vanished. Suppose he were in there now—what would he be like? Around her the glistening cartons shifted restlessly; their gaping tops nodded. Twisted skeletons rattled, jangling.

Some of the squealing of metal might be an animal's faint cry; perhaps the metal was what they'd heard. "All right," Sandra said from the dark, "you're not my friend."

Debbie glanced about hopelessly. A taste touched her mouth. Above her, ruins gleamed jaggedly against the sky; cartons dipped their mouths toward her, torn lips working. Among piled bricks at the edge of the cutting, a punctured football or a crumpled rag peered down at her. Unwillingly she walked forward.

Darkness fell on her, filling her eyes. "Wait until your eyes get used to it," Sandra said, but Debbie disliked to keep them closed for long. At last bricks began to solidify from the dark. Darkness arched over her, outlines of bricks glinted faintly. The rails were thin dull lines, shortly erased by the dark.

Sandra groped forward. "Go slowly, then we won't fall over anything," she

said.

They walked slowly as a dream, halting every few feet to wait for the light to catch up. Debbie's eyes were full of shifting fog which fastened very gradually on her surroundings, sketching them: the dwindling arch of the tunnel, the fading rails. Her progress was like a ritual in a nightmare.

The first stretch of the tunnel was cluttered with missiles: broken bottles crunched underfoot, tin cans toppled loudly. After that the way was clear, except for odd lurking bricks. But the dark was oppressively full of the sounds the girls made—hasty breathing, shuffling, the chafing of rust against their feet—and Debbie could never be sure whether, amid the close sounds and the invisibility, there was a whining.

They shuffled onward. Cold encircled them, dripping. The tunnel smelled dank and dusty; it seemed to insinuate a bitter taste into Debbie's mouth. She felt the weight of earth huge around the stone tube. The dimness flickered forward again, beckoning them on. It was almost as though someone were coaxing them into the tunnel with a feeble lamp. Beneath her feet bricks scraped and clattered.

The twilight flickered, then leapt ahead. The roundness of the tunnel glistened faintly; Debbie could make out random edges of brick, a dull hint of rails. The taste grew in her mouth. Again she felt that they were being led. She didn't dare ask Sandra whether the light were really moving. It must be her eyes. A shadow loomed on the arch overhead: the bearer of the light—behind her. She turned gasping. At once the dimness went out. The distant mouth of the tunnel was small as a fingernail.

Its light couldn't have reached so far. Something else had illuminated their way. The taste filled her mouth, like suffocation; dark dripped all around her; the distant entrance flickered, dancing. If she made for the entrance Sandra would have to follow. She could move now, she'd only to move one foot, just one, just a little. Sandra screamed.

When Debbie turned—furious with Sandra: there was nothing to be scared of, they could go now, escape—shadows reached for her. The light had leapt ahead again, still dim but brighter. The shadows were attached to vague objects, of which the nearest seemed familiar. Light gathered on it, crawling, glimmering. It had large ragged ears. It was her old lost teddy bear.

It was moving. In the subterranean twilight its fur stirred as if drowned. No, it wasn't the fur. Debbie's bear was covered with a swarm that crawled. The swarm was emerging sluggishly from within the bear, piling more thickly on its body, crawling.

It was a lost toy, not hers at all. Nothing covered it but moisture and unstable light. "It's all right," she muttered weakly. "It's only someone's old bear." But

Sandra was staring beyond it, sobbing with horror.

Further in, where dimness and dark flickered together, there was a hole in the floor of the tunnel, surrounded by bricks and earth and something that squatted. It squatted at the edge; its hands dangled into the hole, its dim face gaped pinkly. Its eyes gleamed like bubbles of mud.

"Oh, oh," Sandra sobbed. "It's the monkey."

"Perhaps that was the worst—that Sandra knew the gaping face too. But Debbie's horror was blurred and numbing, because she could see so much. She could see what lay beside the hole, struggling feebly as if drugged, and whining: Mop.

Sandra staggered toward him as if she had lost her balance. Debbie stumbled after her, unable to think, feeling only her feet dragging her over the jagged floor. Then part of the darkness shifted and advanced on them, growing paler. A toy—a large clockwork toy, jerking rustily: the figure of a little boy, its body and ragged sodden clothes covered with dust and cobwebs. It plodded jerkily between them and the hole, and halted. Parts of it shone white, as if patched with flaking paint: particularly the face.

Debbie tried to look away, to turn, to run. But the taste burned in her mouth; it seemed to thread her with a rigid frame, holding her helpless. The dim stone tube was hemmed in by darkness; the twilight fluttered. Dust crawled in her throat. The toy bear glistened restlessly. The figure of the little boy swayed; its face glimmered, pale, featureless, blotchy. The monkey moved.

Its long hands closed around Mop and pulled him into the hole, then they scooped bricks and earth on top of him. The earth struggled in the hole, the whining became a muffled coughing and choking. Eventually the earth was still. The squat floppy body capered on the grave. Thick deep laughter, very slow, dropped from the gaping face. Each time the jaw drooped lower, almost touching the floor.

Another part of the dark moved. "That'll teach you. You won't forget that," a voice said.

It was the witch. She was lurking in the darkness, out of sight. Her voice was as lifeless now as her face had been. Debbie was able to see that the woman needed to hide in the dark to be herself. But she was trapped too efficiently for the thought to be at all reassuring.

"You'd better behave yourselves in future. I'll be watching," the voice said.
"Go on now. Go away."

As Debbie found she was able to turn, though very lethargically, the little boy moved. She heard a crack; then he seemed to shrink jerkily, and toppled toward her. But she was turning, and saw no more. The taste was heavy in her. She

couldn't run; she could only plod through the close treacherous darkness toward the tiny light.

The light refused to grow. She plodded, she plodded, but the light held itself back. Then at least it seemed nearer, and much later it reached into the dark. She plodded out, exhausted and hollow. She clambered numbly up the bank, dragged her feet through the deserted streets; she was just aware of Sandra near her. She climbed the stairs, slipped the key into the handbag, went into her room, still trudging. Her numb trudge became the plodding of her heart, her slow suffocated gasps. She woke.

So it had been a dream, after all. Her mouth tasted bitter. What had awakened her? She lay uneasily, eyelids tight, trying to retreat into sleep; if she awoke completely she'd be alone with the dark. But light flapped on her eyelids. Something was wrong. The room was too bright, and flickering. Things crackled loudly, popping; a voice cried her name. Reluctantly she groped to the window, toward the blazing light.

The witch's house was on fire. Flames gushed from the windows, painting smoke red. Sandra stood outside, crying "Debbie!" As Debbie watched, bewildered, a screaming blaze appeared at an upstairs window, jerking like a puppet; then it writhed and fell back into the flames. Sandra seemed to be dancing, outlined by reflected fire, and weeping.

People were unlocking doors. Sandra's mother hurried out, and Debbie's father. Sandra's mother fluttered about, trying to drag the girl home, but Sandra was crying "Debbie!" Debbie gripped the sill, afraid to let go.

More houses were switched on. Debbie's mother ran out. There was a hasty discussion among the parents, then Debbie's father came hurrying back with Sandra. Debbie dodged into bed as they came upstairs; the witch's house roared, splintering.

"Here's Sandra, Debbie. She's frightened. She's going to sleep with you tonight." Shadows rushed into the room with him. When Sandra took off her dressing-gown and stood holding it, confused, he threw it impatiently on the chair. "Into bed now, quickly. And just you stay there."

They heard him hurrying downstairs, Sandra's mother saying "Oh God, oh my God," Debbie's mother trying to calm her down. The girls lay silent in the shaking twilit room. Sandra was trembling.

"What happened?" Debbie whispered. "Did you see?"

After a while Sandra sobbed. "My little dog," she said indistinctly.

Was that an answer? Debbie's thoughts were blurred; the room quaked, Sandra's dressing-gown was slipping off the chair, distracting her. "What about Mop?" she whispered. "Where is he?"

Sandra seemed to be choking. The dressing-gown fell in a heap on the floor. Debbie felt nervous. What had happened to Mop? She'd dreamed—Surely Sandra couldn't have dreamed that too. The rest of the contents of the chair were following the dressing-gown.

"I dreamed," Debbie began uneasily, and bitterness filled her mouth like a gag. When she'd finished choking, she had forgotten what she'd meant to say. The room and furniture were unsteady with dimming light. Far away and fading, she heard her parents' voices.

Sandra was trying to speak. "Debbie," she said, "Debbie." Her body shook violently, with effort or with fear. "I burned the witch," she said. "Because of what she did."

Debbie stared in front of her, aghast. She couldn't take in Sandra's words. Too much had happened too quickly: the dream, the fire, her own bitter-tasting dumbness, Sandra's revelation, the distracting object that drooped from the chair—But until Sandra's dressing-gown was thrown there, that chair had been empty.

She heard Sandra's almost breathless cry. Something dim squatted forward on the chair. Its pink yawning drooped toward the floor. Very slowly, relishing each separate word, it began to speak.

BROKEN GLASS by Harlan Ellison

In the twenty-five years since he sold his first science fiction story, Harlan Ellison has published some forty books—an accomplishment made all the more astonishing for an author primarily known for his short fiction. Born in Ohio in 1934, Ellison moved to New York in the mid 1950s where he launched his career writing for the numerous science fiction magazines of the period. Moving away from the confinement of the science fiction ghetto, by the close of the 1960s Ellison had established himself as a major modern author—and certainly one of the most controversial. Multitalented, Ellison has edited the equally controversial anthologies, Dangerous Visions (1967), Again, Dangerous Visions (1972), and the forthcoming Last Dangerous Visions, and he has written two volumes of collected essays, The Glass Teat (1969) and The Other Glass Teat (1975). Since 1962 Ellison has lived in the Los Angeles area, where he has achieved considerable acclaim as a television script writer. In 1975 a film adaptation was released of his post-nuclear holocaust novella, "A Boy and His Dog," itself incorporated into Ellison's forthcoming novel, Blood's a Rover. In recent years three important collections of Ellison's fantasy stories have been published: Deathbird Stories (1975), Strange Wine (1978), and Shatterday (1980).

Harlan Ellison has the potent gift of evoking the innermost fears of the soul, and he defies convention and taboo to hold a mirror when we turn our faces from the truths that are hidden behind our eyes—as "Broken Glass" so relentlessly proves.

Dana was sitting in the window seat on the left side of the bus, eyes closed, breathing shallowly, having the teak fantasy, when she became aware of the Peeping Tom in her mind.

She had reconciled the teak fantasy years before: what it might say about the basic nature of her sexuality had no bearing on its potency: as a lubricating daydream when she was in a place where she could do nothing physical to bring herself off, the teak fantasy was the best.

She fantasized herself as a cocktail waitress in a small restaurant frequented almost exclusively by beautiful, slimhipped models seen repeatedly on television commercials, who worked out of an agency in the building just across the street.

She was wearing a very short miniskirt and smoke-colored panty hose that had a small rip in the crotch. In the fantasy she always reminded herself to repair the rip before someone noticed. In the fantasy her breasts were larger than in real life, and they stood out prominently against the white-and-blue peasant blouse. In the fantasy she wore a wide patent leather wristband, shiny black against her pale left wrist.

She was serving two exquisite models, one of them certainly Eurasian, the other a black woman with incredible high cheekbones. As she bent over the table to place the dishes of food, she felt a hand steal up her thighs and over her buttocks from behind. She looked over her shoulder and a blonde who wore her hair in a highly styled Gibson Girl coiffure was leaning away from the table behind her, a slim hand up under Dana's skirt. She heard herself gasp.

The old man in the bus seat beside her looked up from his copy of *The National Review*, then looked away quickly, as though he had been caught eavesdropping. She was unaware of him. The blonde had found the rip in her panty hose.

In the fantasy, the two models she was serving had moved their plates to an empty table, and now they were gently, but forcefully, bending her forward. The edge of the table pressed tightly into her stomach, her cheek lay against the warm teak of the tabletop. There was no peripheral sound in the fantasy, just sounds of voices dimly heard, her own murmuring down in her throat. The blonde had flipped up her little skirt, exposing Dana's upper thighs and buttocks. She had her finger inside the rip, exploring.

The Eurasian and the black model were stroking Dana's long brown hair, her ears, her cheek, her neck. The Eurasian was pushing down the elastic top of the peasant blouse, revealing Dana's smooth back. In the fantasy she had no moles on her back, it was all smooth and white, now turning faintly rose-colored as blood rushed through her body.

Now the blonde was on her knees behind Dana; and Dana could feel the woman's hands on the hemispheres of her ass, spreading her slightly. Then something moist and ever so quick touched her vagina and she squeezed her eyes shut with pleasure.

The models were saying things she could not understand as their faces came down and their tongues ran over her neck and cheek. She felt herself breathing with difficulty; short, mouth-drying breaths, splendid little gasps.

And then she realized someone else was watching.

She saw a pair of eyes, as black as marbles, surrounded by dark shadows; the kind of circular darkening of the skin she sometimes saw around her own eyes when she had been working long hours, when she was tired, when she

accidentally caught her reflection in a mirror; surrounding the eyes, not merely beneath them.

They were the eyes of a man. She had no way of knowing that; but she knew it. There was a man watching her and the three models as she lay bent over the table on her stomach, as they worked at her body, the blonde's face buried between her legs, the Eurasian and the black woman licking her smooth, pink and white, unblemished back.

She began to tremble, but this time it was not the secret and contained trembling the fantasy always brought. It was the trembling of the fear she experienced every time she walked down a dark and unfamiliar street. She was being *watched!*

Then she heard the man's voice: *Is that nice? Does it feel especially nice?*

The gentle silences and warm teak security of the fantasy were suddenly disrupted by the sound of a sustained, keening whine: metallic, shocking, like biting down on a piece of tin foil. The whine of a giant generator going wild. It climbed and climbed and Dana shuddered like a patient on a shock table.

"Get out of my head!"

The old man with the magazine jumped away from her, dropping a box of doughnuts that had been resting on his lap. Everyone on the bus turned to stare at her. Dana was shaking, moving her hands in front of her eyes, batting at invisible cobwebs, pulling her hair away from the sides of her face as if to provide openings through which the Peeping Tom could escape.

Then she opened her eyes, and she was still on the bus.

Everyone was staring. The old man was standing in the aisle, looking terrified. And she knew one of these people, one of these men had been inside her fantasy, watching everything.

And it was a long bus ride.

The driver's voice, distorted by the intercom system, echoed through the bus. "Everything okay back there?" They had been on the Interstate for several hours and he was clearly trying to make time despite the rain lashing the divided highway: he neither pulled over nor turned around. Dana could see only the back of his head ... and his eyes in the enormous rearview mirror. They seemed to be black.

The terribly thin, elderly woman in the right side aisle seat in front of Dana looked concerned. "Are you all right, dear?"

Dana's mouth was dry. She couldn't get her lips to form the words. She nodded quickly and heard herself croak, "Bad dream ..."

The elderly woman raised her voice to the driver. "It's all right, Driver. She just had a bad dream."

The intercom squawked. "What?"

The florid man beside the old woman cupped his meaty hands and shouted, "It's okay, okay; lady back here had a bad dream. It's okay ... just watch the road!"

Everyone laughed. Not long, and not loud. But the passengers settled down and turned around. The old man retrieved his doughnuts and looked at her querulously before resuming his seat. She smiled up at him quickly, shyly, trying to allay his fear. He seemed timid and nervous, and when he sat down it was not all the way back in the padded seat. His battered hat shaded his eyes, concealed their color.

The bus hurtled on through the night.

Out there in the darkness cut by the slanting lines of silvery rain, a smash of lightning fractured the sky and lit nothing discernible.

And here, inside and warm, Dana shivered knowing that she was not alone. The feeling was not merely fear. Horror came with the knowledge that one of these men could wander unchecked through her most private thoughts. Once, while living in Boston, her apartment had been robbed. It had not been the theft of her stereo and camera and portable television set and even her best clothes—her leather car coat and other marketable goods carried away in the new parachute-fabric luggage—that had sent her to the bathroom to be sick in the sink. It had been the eerie certainty that someone had *touched* the apartment. Had walked the rooms. Had opened the drawers where her private life was neatly ranked. Had exposed her most intimate secrets. Had walked across her grave. The place had been defiled. Shadows and alien odors now lay across the planes and angles where she had stood naked. She had moved out three days later.

Now the last private refuge in the world had been soiled. The far, secret grotto no one could ever visit had been invaded. There were footprints other than her own in the sand of that hidden cavern at the center of her life. Now there was nothing safe, nothing sacred, nothing inviolate. When the newspaper stories of deranged street violence became too much for her, when the radio's endless dotage on slaughter and dismemberments made her gag with fear, when the six o'clock news bore loving eyewitness to the fragility of the human spirit ... now there was no place to run. The door that never needed locks and bars keys could not be closed.

The one mundane aspect of the Boston robbery that had induced screaming in her soul, that had left her no choice but to move, had been waiting for her in the bathroom when she went to vomit. The burglar had used the toilet. He had urinated and had left the seat up. Nothing brought home to her more forcefully

than that inconsequential difference in sexes, that it had been a man, a strange man, an unknown and faceless man, who had invaded her universe. Men leave the seat up on the toilet after pissing.

She felt that same inarticulate alarm now.

And he spoke to her again. *You show me your kink and I'll show you mine.*

Then he was there again, the black eyes surrounded by fatigued, discolored skin. There, again, and filling the grotto of her mind with his own fantasy.

She whimpered and huddled against the window, pressing her face to the bitterly cold pane. Rain pelted the glass and a shell-burst sound she realized dimly was thunder out there in the night commanded her attention but could not dim the clarity of the Peeping Tom's vile fantasy. He had appropriated her fantasy image of herself, and was using it to his own purpose.

Dana buried the heels of her palms in her closed eyes, trying with the pressure to drive the vision away. But he was strong, he had been visiting women's minds for a very long time—she knew that, she knew it—and he had anchored himself for as long as the pleasure would take.

He was experienced at it. It was sharp and clear and there was sound—moist, wrenching, meaty sounds—and the sounds of bone cracking—and the sound of suction—and most disgusting of all there was the smell of him.

She heard herself mewling like a small animal, and she drew her knees up from the floor, into the seat.

Beside her, the old man quietly got up and moved to the back of the bus. Across from Dana a woman in her forties stole a sidewise glance, trying to discern what was troubling the writhing figure in the shadows against the window.

Then the invader reached orgasm after orgasm and there was the sinking feeling of a falling elevator, with the certain knowledge that the cable had parted; and there was the hard, thin feel of a sharp wire cutting the soft inside of her cheek, with the certain knowledge that needles would have to stitch it up; and there was the shrieking horror of a car crash, with the certain knowledge that someone she loved was being pulped to garbage behind the wheel; and there was the pressure of vomit burning its track up into her mouth, with the certain knowledge that the poison was still in her belly and the track of acid would come again and again; and there was the overwhelming feeling of his pleasure as he came and came and came ...

When she regained her composure, the woman from across the aisle, and the thin old lady who had called to the driver, were bending over her. The younger woman was holding a paper cup of water to Dana's lips. "Here ... sip at this ... are you all right ... should we tell the driver to take the next exit and maybe find

you a doctor ... are you all right ...?"

Dana pushed at the cup of water, spilling some down the front of her jacket. The tweed absorbed it at once. "No, I'm fine, I'm *fine*," she said huskily. She wanted to bathe. She wanted to stand under a shower for a long time, though she knew it was the worst thing to do after rape.

And the word was there, for the first time. She had been raped. No different than the lumbering shape with a knife in the alley. No different than the lurker on the landing who had unscrewed the light bulb throwing the stairwell into darkness. No different than the disembodied hand on her breast in the crowded theater lobby. No different.

Wasn't that nice? His voice was emotionless. If she had been presented with a dozen police voiceprints of possible assailants she would not have been able to pick him out of the pack. However he was doing it, coming and going in her mind, he was shrouding himself absolutely.

If you like that, he said, wait until I start the variations. And he showed her a moment of what was to come.

Dana felt her eyes rolling up in her head, and then she fainted.

Half-world. Iron colored. Misty.

Semiconscious, she knew she had found another level; one from which he was excluded. Half-aware, she willed herself not to sharpen her senses, secure down there under the swirling cloud cover, like a primordial beast swimming in murky waters. Now she felt another emotion: fury.

The assault had been more effective than he could have known. Dana had moved through nights and days of her life, had felt the power for her existence outside herself, had been manipulated and had exercised free will. But she had never been moved as now.

This creature could not be allowed to live.

She felt herself regaining total consciousness. She fought it. She needed time down here beneath the surface, drifting languidly in the gray and swirling waters, learning what it took to kill. This is how we came out of the sea, she thought. Out of the sea and into the street. No more fear of alleys.

The concept of fangs grew in her mind.

Not fangs: the *concept* of fangs.

Slowly, kindly, painstakingly, arming herself, she came back to the world.

The driver, the old woman, and the woman with the water were waiting for her. Yes, the driver's eyes were black. But he wasn't the one who roamed at will through the grotto of her thoughts. Because the invader was there, too.

You missed the fun, he said. I had to start without you.

He had left the area foul from his pleasures.

Like a picnic ground overrun by barbarians, he had left the evidence of his passion. She felt the sickness rising in her again.

“I’ll be all right now,” she said to the concerned faces hanging over her. She said it in a strong, controlled voice, and she looked at them directly. “I said: I’ll be just fine now. Really. You can start the bus.” They were parked on the shoulder. Cars shushed and swept past in the rain.

She smiled at the driver. “I’m fine.”

He looked at her. “You sure?”

“I’m okay now. Just motion sickness … and bad dreams.”

You tell him, kid, the rapist said.

The driver and the two concerned women returned to their seats, the bus heaved an asthmatic sigh and pulled Out onto the Interstate again.

Dana got up and walked to the front of the bus.

She began walking back slowly, looking into the face of each passenger. There were many men here. Some were awake, and they looked back at her. She was the weirdo in the rear. Others were asleep—or pretending to be asleep. She looked at every one of them. With the overhead lights out, they *all* had black eyes. Dark circles under brow ridges. No way of selecting him from the mass of male passengers.

I see you but you don’t see me, he said.

She walked all the way to the rear, causing the old man with the box of doughnuts to scrunch down in the back seat. Then she resumed her place. *Well, which one am I?* he asked.

She spoke to him. Silently. There in the grotto.

Well, whichever one you are, you haven’t seen anything yet, darlin’. Like his, her voice was emotionless. Fangs.

Then she went to that part of her secret grotto where the dreams she feared to dream were kept. In there, in that walled-off section, was all the broken glass.

She began clawing at the mortar binding the bricks together, and it came away much more easily than she’d expected. Her fingers bloodied quickly, but she was able to prise out one of the kiln-dried rectangles. She clutched at the top of the next brick below the opening in the wall … and wrenched it loose. Then another. And another. The wall came away quickly, and as the rows of bricks dropped, the horrors inside were revealed.

The rapist seemed fascinated. *Oh, yeah. The good stuff. I knew you were too squeaky clean to be true.*

She pulled out the nearest awfulness and let it expand in the sweet but now polluted air of her secret grotto. Like a fine mist, it spread and there they were

together, Dana and the rapist, in a special fantasy.

The dog was a German shepherd. She got down on her knees. The dog stood waiting. She looked over her shoulder but it did not move. Then she put two fingers inside herself and moistened them and, on hands and knees, went to the dog and touched the fingers to its muzzle. She turned her back again and the dog came to her.

The rapist watched. The black eyes were lit with a malevolent fire. And the skin around the eyes darkened. And now Dana could see the shadow of a nose below the eyes, as he watched her ... while the dog mounted.

Before the fantasy could end, Dana let another loose from behind the brick enclosure. It was a gynecology examination.

She was naked on her back on the table, feet up in the stirrups. But she was taped down, bands of shipping filament tape strapped across her stomach and her thighs, holding her arms and shoulders and neck to the table. And in the examination fantasy she conceived the thick, inserting rod with the razored spines. And the rapist's hand and arm and the left side of his body could be seen, and he took the rod and he came to her there on the table. She screamed and begged, but he used it nonetheless.

And the water fantasy.

And then the wax fantasy.

And then the fantasy of cutting small holes in one's love partner and putting that certain part of his body—which now could be seen by Dana—in the terrible little holes.

And then the meat fantasy without laughter.

And then ...

While he worked, while he worked fascinated, while he worked fascinated to the point of obliviousness, she began creating walls. Not bricks this time, because unlike the initial sealing off of the horrors that she might one day wish to experience again, this was to be an enclosure from which no escape was possible.

And she bound him there with her fantasy body. No *vagina edentata*, no castratory pleasure of his secret self-hatred. She bound him with a muscular lock that no amount of struggling could ease. She spasmed once, a vise-grip wrench that locked together with a crushing pressure that would not permit withdrawal.

And she raised the steel walls around him, leaving him in there in a darkness with that now-discarded fantasy female who could never be used again, not even by herself.

And the only light would come from the horrors that would escape from behind the brick enclosure, for time without end, and which would eventually

present themselves so bent and diseased and horrible that not even he, alien Visigoth marauder, not even he could derive joy from them.

And she left her fantasy grotto.

When the bus pulled into Philadelphia, she was the first one off. She hurried away from the station, knowing that she had lost the only secret place anyone ever *really* has to hide in. She had lost the ability to dream those private dreams; and what that would mean to her she could not say. Worse, she now knew what horrors she had kept entombed, knew that she was one with the rest of the human race, each member of which had grotesqueries beyond belief merely waiting to claw their way out from behind insufficient brickwork.

She was not sure she could bear to be Dana, knowing what had always lived, breathing deeply, behind those walls.

But she also knew that this animal would never walk the streets again.

When the bus was emptied, one passenger would still be sitting there, hollow-eyed and with a recognizable expression of demented agony on his face. And no matter where they took him, from that bus and from that station, no matter where they took things that had once been human and were now vegetables ... no matter where that final passenger came to rest, he would spend the number of his days locked away from the real world where he could do harm.

He, like Dana, would spend his days and nights alone.

The difference was only broken glass.

"THE BEST THAT THE GENRE HAS TO OFFER."
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ISBN 0-88677-160-9